if you don't have your own boyfriend, rented is fine

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by nyoomerr

Summary

After being turned away by the nice Shizun of that other world, Luo Binghe finds himself in the modern world where he can find a new nice Shizun for himself. Instead, he finds Shen Yuan, who could not possibly be who he's searching for - he's crass, and inelegant, and looks only vaguely related to Shen Qingqiu.

Luckily for both of them, Shen Yuan mistakes Luo Binghe as a cosplayer for hire, and asks to rent him out as his very normal new boyfriend.

Notes

this is very much inspired by a news article i saw about girls hiring cosplayers to date them as their favorite video game characters - i've never seen anything that screamed 'shen yuan' more in my LIFE.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luo Binghe is standing outside Shen Yuan's favorite convenience store. Luo Binghe, as in the badass, sword-swinging, panty-dropping protagonist from Proud Immortal Demon Way, who makes the convenience store look positively dingy just by standing next to it with his natural good looks.

Obviously, this isn't *actually* Luo Binghe, because Luo Binghe is a fictional character and it would be delusional for Shen Yuan to assume that a real life man is a fake character just because he's pretty and could probably bench press several times Shen Yuan's body weight.

However, if it cannot be Luo Binghe, it can only be an extremely talented Luo Binghe cosplayer. It's simply too accurate of a look! Makeup gurus would pay awful amounts of money to learn this cosplayer's secret to making his perfectly painted demon mark glow even in the bright daylight! Cosplayers everywhere would feel faint even looking at the clearly top-tier quality of his robes!

It's really much too good of a Luo Binghe cosplayer on *much* too handsome of a person, and yet Shen Yuan is sure he hadn't heard of any sort of convention or PIDW meetup this weekend, let alone anything so near to where he lives. And if a pretty man dresses up in cosplay without the intention to go to a fan event…

Shen Yuan swallows thickly. He glances back down at the forum page he'd pulled up in a panic when he'd first seen the Luo Binghe cosplayer, stopping in an unfortunately suspicious-looking alley across the street from the convenience store to read it.

"I'm Dating my Favorite Husbando, and You Can Too!"

It's an objectively terrible post. The spacing of the paragraphs is all over the place, the inserted pictures aren't particularly flattering, and the cosplayer-slash-rented boyfriend in them looks like they'd gotten tired of wearing their customer service smile some dozen pictures previous.

And yet…

Shen Yuan glances back up at the Luo Binghe cosplayer. He's been watching the busy street assessingly, as if trying to memorize the traffic patterns. More likely, given the fact that he's a pretty man dressed up in broad daylight on a street corner, he's -

Well. He's… he might be going hungry! If he's looking for work so blatantly, isn't it because he's desperate!? For him to have the nerve to stand out in public basically begging for someone to rent him out, that cosplayer may not have eaten in days!

The lights turn, and the crosswalk blinks on. The Luo Binghe cosplayer watches the traffic pattern change with narrowed eyes, and Shen Yuan slides out from his hiding place and crosses the street. He feels extremely sweaty.

Not that he's going to be doing anything he should be nervous about! Haha! Completely normal plans for Shen Yuan!

It's normal to want to help someone who's struggling to make ends meet, and it's *very* normal to hire a cosplayer to go on a few dates. There'd been articles in the news about the forum post Shen Yuan had been looking at when it had first been published, you know! Things that go in the news are popular and normalized and totally a super cool thing to try out for yourself if you get the chance!

It's - well, perhaps there might be some sense of oddity that Shen Yuan is not a girl who needs their favorite character to make her feel a bit special, but even that can be explained away quite easily once you think about it for just a small moment! After all, all the stories that Shen Yuan had heard about for this kind of thing had involved renting cosplayers who dressed as *male* characters. Thus, if Shen Yuan is to participate in this popular and very normal trend, it would make perfect sense for the cosplayer he hires to also be dressed as a male character! It's just how it is! A built in no-homo!

Shen Yuan somehow only feels more sweaty. The most likely explanation to this is his proximity to the Luo Binghe cosplayer - he's only a few feet away, now, and Shen Yuan can see far more of the detail of his pretty face. Obviously it would make any guy sweat to see someone that objectively gorgeous. In fact, Shen Yuan should have expected it! After all, it had been this cosplayer's good looks that had first clued Shen Yuan into the idea that they might be trying to rent themselves out. Someone that pretty simply *must* be for dating, he'd thought, and he'd certainly been right!

"Excu -" Shen Yuan's voice cracks, and he makes a pitiful attempt to clear his throat. The Luo Binghe cosplayer turns to look turns to look at him disdainfully, and Shen Yuan tries not to devolve into a full blown coughing fit. "Um, excuse me, you, ah…"

The cosplayer looks down at Shen Yuan with the sort of expression Shen Yuan would assume gym bros use when they've found a non-regular using their preferred piece of equipment. He clears his throat again. This close, the height difference between them is - well, it - oh, *fuck,* Shen Yuan is *so, so sweaty.*

"What's your name?" Shen Yuan asks, stupidly, when his brain takes too long to boot back online and his mouth is put into auto pilot.

"Refer to me as 'my Lord,'" Luo Binghe replies icily, and *oh wow,* he's a *roleplayer.*

"Right! Uh, my Lord." Shen Yuan wipes his hands uselessly against his pants in an attempt to pat off some of the sweat before he pulls out his wallet. He opens it, breathes a sigh of relief that he has some cash on him - he isn't sure this sort of business would be something tracked through digital payments - and looks back up at Luo Binghe. "What do you want?"

Luo Binghe narrows his eyes at Shen Yuan, clearly wondering if Shen Yuan would really be capable of fulfilling any request he made. Shen Yuan tries not to bristle at the implication - despite what this lazy second-gen rich kid looks like, he *is* still a lazy second-gen rich kid, and he's very used to spending obscene amounts of money on Luo Binghe related purchases!

After a long moment, Luo Binghe hums. "This Lord is looking for a person in this world," he says, and Shen Yuan nods quickly enough he probably looks like a deranged bobble head.

"Right," he says, "I figured."

That… had kind of been the whole point of coming over and asking what your prices were, pretty cosplayer! It was assumed you were looking for a customer!

"Did you?" Luo Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan can feel the exact moment his attention sharpens onto him. "And what do you think you can do about that, little boy?"

"Little -!" Shen Yuan splutters, cuts himself off as Luo Binghe's expression goes a bit threatening, and realizes quite quickly that oh, silly him! Of course this cosplayer would call him in an odd way, it was Shen Yuan's own fault for not giving his name!

"I'm - ahem, this one is Shen Yuan, my Lord."

All at once, Luo Binghe is much, much closer to Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan can practically feel the heat of his body in the space between them, and is certainly close enough now to see that there's no way this cosplayer is wearing much makeup, if he's wearing any at all. His skin is just - flawless, perfectly pretty even when Shen Yuan is close enough to see his pores. *What the fuck,* he thinks, quickly followed by, *he is going to be so so expensive.*

"Shen?" Luo Binghe echos back at him, and Shen Yuan tries not to make a face. It isn't an uncommon name, but if this cosplayer is desperate to make money, of course his first thought would be the Stupid Mega Rich Shen Family.

Normally, this would irritate Shen Yuan enough he'd pretend to have never heard of his own family, let alone that he was a part of it.

Just this once, Shen Yuan latches on to his rich blood like the lifeline it is.

"The same Shen my Lord is thinking of."

"Hm. You do look similar…" Luo Binghe trails off, looking Shen Yuan up and down. Shen Yuan feels a bit like a piece of meat being assessed at the market. This cosplayer must *really* be looking to strike it rich, if he's memorized the looks of all the wealthiest families in the area, ah…

Shen Yuan tries to rally himself. He clearly is an attractive customer; he just needs this pretty Luo Binghe to accept his money!

"So long as my Lord is willing to commit to a week - er, a month! - of dating me -" Shen Yuan's voice cracks again, and he just *knows* his face is bright red. Don't be embarrassed,

Shen Yuan! You're just setting up the terms of a very normal and professional service! "- so long as it's for at least that long, I can pay my Lord whatever his price is."

Luo Binghe's eyebrows shoot up, and then all at once his countenance changes. Only a moment ago Shen Yuan felt a bit like he was about to be eaten, and now -

Well. He still feels like that, actually, but it's - hng. It's. Well, Shen Yuan has read stuff! Online stuff, even! Stuff like PIDW, which devolves into terribly written and unrewarding porn every single chapter! He knows sometimes people use 'eat' to talk about - !

"So it's like this, is it?" Luo Binghe asks, voice honey smooth and his eyes half lidded. "The people of this world are truly more bold than even what this Lord is used to."

Shen Yuan swallows thickly. He can't look away from Luo Binghe. He can just barely make out the impression of a too-sharp canine poking out of Luo Binghe's deadly grin.

"This Lord will not take a month," Luo Binghe says, "but I'm willing to accept little Shen Yuan's sponsorship until I've found that person."

Beyond the panic of *oh fuck this pretty man is standing way, way too close to me,* Shen Yuan feels some distant amount of righteous irritation.

"You - my Lord has found *me,"* he protests. It's poor customer service to talk about trying to find your next client before you've even emptied the wallet of your current one, you know!

"You are not who this Lord is looking for," Luo Binghe dismisses. He leans in, one hand coming up to tip Shen Yuan's chin up, gently pushing Shen Yuan's face this way and that as if searching for something in his features. "You are too small; too weak. Little Shen Yuan is cute enough that this Lord will indulge him in exchange for a short sponsorship, but you… This Lord is not looking for *cute."*

Shen Yuan feels electricity race up his spine, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. This cosplayer…

…Is really too rude!!

"Ah? Where do you get off talking like that?" Shen Yuan smacks Luo Binghe's hand away, taking a couple steps back so he couldn't be so easily grabbed again. "You -! Just because you're pretty -!"

"Mm," Luo Binghe hums, "Shen Yuan is *very* cute. It's been some time since this Lord got to have someone feisty."

Shen Yuan's protests trail off into an excellent impression of a whistling tea kettle. Ah, what's with this roleplaying!! Please, turn down the flirtation for just long enough for us to agree on some terms here!!

"Shen Yuan doesn't have to worry," Luo Binghe says. "This Lord will still accept your sponsorship even with your protests. You will provide me with accommodations and

resources as I look for my person, and you will bring me to meet your family to assist with this."

"Wha - hey! That's -!"

"Do not look down on this Lord to assume it will take me an entire month to achieve my goals," Luo Binghe interrupts. "But until that time comes, this Lord will accept your suit. It would only benefit this Lord to have some amount of practice with a Shen, after all."

Shen Yuan stares up at Luo Binghe in disbelief. He considers looking around to see if he's being filmed, as if this might all be some elaborate prank. If it isn't, if this Luo Binghe is really dead serious about this, then that…

That means he wants to *live* with Shen Yuan, and to meet his parents! That - that's far too fast, even for someone roleplaying as a man known for bedding and marrying the wife of the week within 48 hours of meeting her! Is this some sort of new service, hiring cosplayers to act out late-stage relationships instead of a handful of playful dates??

On top of that, he's *still* talking about trying to find another customer while he's dating Shen Yuan! Talking about using Shen Yuan as *practice,* even, as if he's some sort of entry-level rich kid to practice on before finding a date with a real socialite!

Ah, wait…

Shen Yuan narrows his eyes, regarding Luo Binghe with newfound suspicion. "Are you looking to get married?"

Luo Binghe grins down at him, and - oh, shit, he must have paid *so* much money to have his teeth altered to be that sharp!

"It's what I deserve," Luo Binghe replies easily. "This Lord will accept nothing less, once he's found his person."

Shen Yuan tries not to grimace. So it's like that… He lights a candle in his heart for the naive half-hopes he'd had about this being a cosplayer for hire. Clearly, he'd been wrong.

In reality, this is just a gold digger who happens to really like roleplaying!!

Ah, where has society gone so wrong?! How can a grown man reach this stage of his life and still be so shameless! Standing on the street just waiting to catch an unsuspecting rich kid, just to dismiss him as not marriage material and outright declare your intent to use him to climb up into high society and find a *different* rich partner!?

Truly, this Luo Binghe is bold!! Shameless! Probably even a little insane!!

…Shen Yuan still can't stop looking at him. It really is a very, very good cosplay.

And really, for someone to demand accommodations as part of their payment, isn't it just that they don't have any other option? No one would actually choose to live with their client if they had their own place to stay! Well, okay, maybe in the case of a gold digger there may be

some intent to get inside the generally high security apartment complexes of the mega-rich, and sure, maybe living with Shen Yuan would help Luo Binghe do that, but -!

But if that *wasn't* the case, and this cosplayer really did just need a place to stay and couldn't bear breaking character long enough to ask politely…

Shen Yuan is still staring at Luo Binghe. Looking at his unreasonably beautiful face, Shen Yuan doesn't have to work hard to imagine him alone in the rain, with no home to seek shelter in. His robes would get all sodden and ruined, and then Luo Binghe wouldn't even have a means of making money without his cosplay-inspired services.

Shen Yuan should probably figure out the exact circumstances of this Luo Binghe's life before committing to anything. If it's just that he needs accommodations, perhaps Shen Yuan can lend him some money separately from the payments for renting him out for a few dates, and then Luo Binghe can pay him back later once he's on his feet. Then there's no risk of Luo Binghe being left out in the rain, and no need for him to live with his client. Or, if it comes down to it, Shen Yuan could probably just rent out an apartment for Luo Binghe himself. His parents might even encourage it, if he talks about how it could be used as a charitable note on his taxes this year.

Instead, Shen Yuan says, "I have a spare room. For accommodations. For you. If you want."

A spare room you haven't even looked inside of in months! Idiot, you don't even know if the maids have been cleaning it properly, and you offer it to a stranger? No, wait, the 'offering it to a stranger' part is what you should be focusing on here, take it back quickly -!

Luo Binghe flicks a hand dismissively. "That will be passable for now. This Lord will not be staying long anyway."

Haha! Fuck!!

Shen Yuan swallows back his protests. There's nothing for it - he offered, Luo Binghe accepted, that's that. Even if they hadn't actually signed any sort of contract yet, he couldn't just take it back now. That would be *rude,* and Shen Yuan is one of the least rude people he knows.

(Across the city, the hundreds of PIDW readers who have had the misfortune of reading any of Peerless Cucumber's scathing comments feel like their graves have just been stomped over. The poor man who had once responded to one of the legendary critiques with a 'Luo Binghe isn't going to fuck you, lol,' and had to almost immediately deactivate his account to escape Peerless Cucumber's passionate "dismissal of his concerns" feels quite suddenly very ill.

Shen Yuan remains blissfully, purposefully unaware.)

"Right, okay, cool cool cool," Shen Yuan says, feeling like he's doing a spectacular job of keeping it together. "Accommodations, check. Meeting my parents -"

"The whole family, little Shen Yuan, until I've found who I'm looking for."

"- is impossible right now since they're out of town, which is good because if I took you to them now they would tear you apart for being so rude, and then you would *certainly* not be living with me anymore," Shen Yuan finishes, glaring up at Luo Binghe.

Luo Binghe's eyes narrow. "Shen Yuan had best rethink his words. Calling this Lord rude for delivering a reminder of our contract is out of line, even if you are to be my lover for some time."

Internally, Shen Yuan keels over and dies. Externally, he pretends to be very, very chill with being called Luo Binghe's lover. It's fine! He can be Luo Binghe's Lover! It's cosplay, it's not gay!

And anyway, dating doesn't count if one party is being a jerk about it!!

"Yea, well, you're the one who said you wanted to use me as 'practice' for your happy marriage, so consider it constructive criticism."

"This Lord meant practice laying with a man," Luo Binghe corrects, smiling sharply. "I need no practice wooing a wife, nor any sort of criticism at all."

"Laying with -!" Shen Yuan wheezes, takes several steps back, and eyes Luo Binghe with newfound wariness. Maybe he should get Luo Binghe his own apartment after all, somewhere far, far away from Shen Yuan's own…

Surely if it got that far, the cosplay would have to come off in order to get down to business, and then - well, then it really *would* be gay, and that's - well, it won't be happening! Shen Yuan is not interested, thank you!!

"That is *not* part of the contract," Shen Yuan says once he's recovered from his shock, voice firm. "And it seems to me like you really could use some practice, if this is how you treat your -" Shen Yuan pauses, struggling between the instinct to say *lovers* and the objective reasoning telling him to say *clients,* and ends up saying nothing at all.

"Shen Yuan dares find me unsatisfactory?" Luo Binghe clarifies. "When you were the one who approached this Lord and asked for this sort of reward for assisting me, you still find the courage to complain so boldly?"

"Maybe I wouldn't have approached you if I knew you were going to be a jerk about it," Shen Yuan spits back, pretending very hard that it's the truth. "For someone looking to win yourself a comfortable marriage with someone as highly valued as a Shen, you sure don't seem very marriable!"

Shen Yuan may not be the most productive member of his family, but even he receives occasional invitations to meetings with young ladies hoping to score entry into his family, you know! And this cosplayer seems to think he'll win a marriage with someone Shen Yuan is only 'practice' for? And in less than a month?! This rich young master would like to see you try, ah!

Between one moment and the next, Luo Binghe is pressed up against Shen Yuan, one hand fisted in the collar of his shirt.

“I *deserve* him,” Luo Binghe seethes, “He will marry me - he *has* married me, if not in this world.”

“You’re fucking insane,” Shen Yuan spits, though it doesn’t come out near as scathing as he’d intended. In his defense, Shen Yuan doesn’t get a lot of practice insulting people who are close enough to choke him to death! “I bet you even know it - referring to some other world vaguely as if that does you any good here in the real one, you’re really taking this roleplaying thing too far. Touch grass, asshole.”

“It’s you who is delusional for thinking you can get away with insulting me, Shen Yuan,” Luo Binghe hisses. “I have no tolerance for fools, even cute ones.”

Luo Binghe rears back, dropping Shen Yuan’s collar and reaching out beside him with his hand. He makes a motion as if intending to reach through something, and then -

Nothing. Not a single thing happens, and Shen Yuan finds himself taking several small steps back as Luo Binghe’s expression turns odd.

“What,” Luo Binghe seethes, “did you do to me.”

“I literally only offered to pay you,” Shen Yuan says, raising his hands up in front of him in a gesture of defense. “And house you, by the way, because I was trying to be *nice.”*

Luo Binghe makes the same gesture with his outstretched hand again, and Shen Yuan realizes where he recognizes it from - it looks nearly identical to the sort of movement actors in his favorite dramas do before the cheesy special effects make a spirit sword appear in their hands.

…This Luo Binghe… might really be a bit too into his roleplay, ah!

“I cannot summon Xin Mo,” Luo Binghe grits out, still glaring at Shen Yuan. Whatever company he bought his colored contacts from really must be applauded, they somehow get more intensely red the angrier Luo Binghe gets! “What did you *do,* Shen Yuan?!”

“Nothing! I really was just trying to hire you, but actually no thanks! I’m good!”

“You incapacitate me and then even take back your measly offer of sponsorship? I’ll -!”

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe both turn to the convenience store they’ve been standing in front of. An employee stands in the doorway, their cellphone in hand.

“I’ll call the cops,” they warn, and Shen Yuan has a moment of panic.

If he has to explain this to the police, he’ll have to explain what he was doing with Luo Binghe in the first place, which means he’ll have to explain that he wanted to hire Luo

Binghe to *date him,* and he'll have to explain how that isn't gay and is instead super normal and also something the police shouldn't look into any further than that, and -

Oh fuck, Shen Yuan does *not* want to have that headache today.

"Sorry," he says, trying to look friendly and not like he wants to knock the idiot next to him over the head for getting him into this mess in the first place by being an *insane roleplayer asshole.* "We were just practicing for a cosplay POV video we were going to be shooting. Uh, 'Luo Binghe from Proud Immortal Demon Way threatens to kill you' POV."

The employee raises an eyebrow at Shen Yuan.

"It's… a new trend. That we're starting right now. Doesn't exist yet but it will! Haha!"

"Hm. Well, do it elsewhere," The employee says before turning around and walking back into the store, and Shen Yuan laughs awkwardly.

There's a moment of silence, and then Shen Yuan rounds on Luo Binghe.

"My spare room, meeting some cousins of mine I don't care for, and a paycheck per date we go on. I get to choose how much the paycheck is at the end of the date based on how much of an asshole you were during it. You can choose to leave before the month is up, but I can choose to kick you out before then too if you piss me off too much. That's my final offer, take it or leave it."

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at Shen Yuan. "You -!"

"I'd take it, if I were you," Shen Yuan interrupts. "Clearly, you need the 'practice.'"

"This Lord is not someone who can be ordered around," Luo Binghe sneers.

"No, of course not," Shen Yuan says, rolling his eyes. "You're an all powerful demonic lord who just happens to have lost access to your sword and all your powers after you crossed into this world, or whatever."

"Yes," Luo Binghe agrees. "So Shen Yuan *does* understand."

"Sure, totally. But let me ask you this, Mr. Powerful Lord with Six Hundred Wives - outside of your ah, *original world,* what's your success rate winning someone over?"

Luo Binghe looks like he's been slapped. "Watch your mouth *,"* he hisses.

Ah, so this 'Luo Binghe' *has* been rejected before. And, judging by the reaction, he hasn't yet gotten over that rejection, either.

Well, that's to be expected, if he's been using this same asshole Lord attitude with everyone who takes an interest in him. Shen Yuan himself should really consider checking himself into a mental institute for even continuing talking with Luo Binghe after he was so rude.

And yet…

Well. It isn't Shen Yuan's fault if he's curious. About the whole renting-a-cosplayer thing, and this pretty gold digger's intentions, and just how far Shen Yuan can push this asshole before he breaks character. Nothing wrong with a little spiteful curiosity sometimes!

"Well? Are you in or not, *Luo Binghe?"*

Luo Binghe snaps his teeth at him. If Luo Binghe were actually part demon, Shen Yuan would probably think that sort of instinctual reaction was quite cute. Since he's just a roleplaying human who seems dead set on *believing* he's part demon, it's just creepy. Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose at him.

Please, Mr. Cosplayer, you really are ruining your good looks with your weird habits!

"...Shen Yuan really believes that this Luo Binghe could not be accepted by your family's standards?" Luo Binghe asks, sounding like he's walking into a trap.

"Definitely not," Shen Yuan snorts. "Whatever sort of person you're trying to trick into a marriage, if they've been raised half as well as me, they'll find you intolerable."

Luo Binghe hesitates. Shen Yuan inwardly sighs. When he's quiet, he really is quite pretty, ah!

"More than your cousins," Luo Binghe eventually says. "This Lord must get the chance to see them all."

"No thanks," Shen Yuan dismisses, and Luo Binghe bares his teeth at him again. "Maybe if you can learn to be civil, I'll reconsider. Until then, not a chance."

Luo Binghe huffs. "No matter. This Lord will find them through you one way or another," he says.

…Shen Yuan turns around and starts walking back home, shoving his wallet back in his pocket as he goes. Some people really are too crazy to be saved!

"Shen Yuan must return this Lord's access to his demonic qi," Luo Binghe calls from behind him. "Even if it was not Shen Yuan who locked it away, it is Shen Yuan who understands the situation well enough he should be able to fix it."

Shen Yuan walks away faster. Behind him, Luo Binghe starts walking after him.

"And you must pay me as much as I require, even outside of when this Lord indulges you on little lover's outings."

…Shen Yuan really can't walk much faster than this without breaking out into a run! Luo Binghe, please give those of us with short legs a break and quit following us!

Luo Binghe catches up to Shen Yuan, catching him by the back of his shirt and lifting him up like a disobedient kitten.

“And,” Luo Binghe says, smile looking particularly threatening, “Shen Yuan will give this Lord his due respect.”

Luo Binghe shakes Shen Yuan a bit, and Shen Yuan weeps inwardly as to the way this shirt will likely be irreparably stretched out after the rough handling. Ah, Luo Binghe, this was a limited edition Miku shirt! Limited edition!!

“The respect you’re *due,”* Shen Yuan grits out, “Is frighteningly low at the moment. How are you feeling about your resistance to state enforced violence, at the moment, with all your magic powers conveniently locked away? I’d love to call that store worker back and tell them to please go through with calling the cops.”

“Little Shen Yuan thinks he can threaten this Lord?” Luo Binghe sneers, shaking Shen Yuan some more. “You weigh less than some of my wives’ *pets,* what could you do?”

“Luckily it doesn’t require much muscle to pick up my phone and call someone else to come beat you up for me,” Shen Yuan grins back at Luo Binghe. “And there isn’t any way I’d believe threats from you anyway - somewhere under all those layers of weird roleplay there has got to be a functioning brain that knows you’d never be able to lay *eyes* on my family if you hurt me, and that really seems to be your main goal here.”

Luo Binghe regards him coldly for a moment. He shakes him again, like he’s a cat watching to see if a caught mouse will start moving around again. Shen Yuan pretends like the act doesn’t intimidate him at all, and that he’s completely unaware of the concept of kidnapping and ransoms and their general success rate in luring out as much of a family as the kidnapper pleases.

Finally, after a long moment, Luo Binghe drops him. Shen Yuan stumbles, catching himself only just before he loses his balance, and glares up at Luo Binghe.

“Just Shen Yuan’s cousins, then, for now. This Lord will convince you otherwise later,” Luo Binghe says.

Shen Yuan sighs. Somehow, he has a feeling that this Luo Binghe’s pretty face will really, really not be worth the trouble ahead of him.

Chapter End Notes

that's right we're doing yet another round of 'giving bingge a sy' >:))

also!! i'm doing things a bit differently this time! usually i wait until i'm done or almost done with an entire fic to start posting it, but i'm testing out posting chapters as i finish them to see if it helps motivate me a bit better, knowing people are waiting for the next

part 😅 so! there's no strict schedule for this one, but i'm going to be trying to update once every two weeks. i hope that it works out, but if not, please be patient w me! :'D

ALSO also, i am once more behind in responding to comments, but as always please know that i am reading them all and appreciate you all very much, and i'll respond to you eventually !! :>

edit: there's fanart!!! from quirefeast, a super fun and cute drawing of sy seeing bingge for the first time (and becoming adorably flustered)! please go take a look and give the art some love!!

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe moves into Shen Yuan's apartment. It goes terribly for both of them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Getting Luo Binghe settled into Shen Yuan's spare room had been hell.

"Hm. It's small, but this Lord will make do," Luo Binghe had said dismissively, when he'd first set foot in the apartment.

"This whole apartment is not your room," Shen Yuan had replied, already exhausted just from the ordeal of getting Luo Binghe past the doorman of his building. He's never going to live down the experience of taking a xianxia cosplayer up to his home, ah…

Shen Yuan squeezes past Luo Binghe, still standing in the doorway, and walks towards the spare room. Luo Binghe watches him as he moves; Shen Yuan wonders if he's so deep in his method acting he's watching for any signs of assassination traps or other bullshit. If it didn't mean Shen Yuan himself was being watched like that, he'd almost think that was cool.

"Here," he says, stopping at the short hallway that leads to the spare room. "The guest room is in there."

Luo Binghe watches Shen Yuan for a moment more, finally steps properly into the apartment, and proceeds to ignore Shen Yuan entirely.

"Hey, wait -"

"Does Shen Yuan not own this whole building?" Luo Binghe asks, not turning to look at Shen Yuan from where he's begun inspecting the living room. "How poor a sponsorship you offer, trying to shove this Lord into only one part of a single set of rooms."

"Why the hell would I own - listen, you have to know my family isn't really into real estate, if you pay so much attention to us. Obviously I don't own the whole apartment complex."

Luo Binghe turns away from the couch to face Shen Yuan. "And what," he says, "does the Shen family do business in?"

Shen Yuan squints at him. To recognize the Shen family, but not what they do… aiya, this man really only continues to baffle him!

“Entertainment,” he grits out.

Luo Binghe’s eyebrows shoot up. “How fitting for the Shens of this world, to be involved in something so crass. Is this where Shen Yuan gets his boldness from, thinking this Lord can be treated like the women of whatever whorehouse you manage?”

Shen Yuan’s face colors with furious embarrassment.

“Movies, asshole! TV dramas! Normal, *legal* entertainment, what the fuck!”

Literally no one would think of - of *that* sort of thing first, when hearing someone’s in the entertainment business! Unless -

Shen Yuan eyes Luo Binghe warily. Is it possible… this cosplayer has that sort of past??

Shen Yuan’s face turns rapidly more red. Ah, think of something else, anything else!

He coughs awkwardly, looking away from Luo Binghe. “And - and anyway, don’t bother trying to get into our business through me, my family knows well enough the sorts of - well, they’d doubt anyone I recommend as new talent would be good at anything but bad xianxia dramas, anyway.”

Which… might not be off base for this roleplayer, but still! This lazy young master has already seen through your plans to be some rich guy’s gold digger trophy husband, don’t try to become a nepo baby in one of the Shen’s movies on top of that!

“Are whorehouses illegal in this world?” Luo Binghe asks, sounding genuinely curious. “How quaint.”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, thinks better of replying to that, and closes his mouth again. He feels like he’s only half a conversation away from accidentally learning that his cosplayer has gotten up to all sorts of things Shen Yuan should report him to the police for, and that’s - well, maybe it would be deserved, but -

Well, they’d probably let Luo Binghe off easy even if he *were* turned in! That’s how things work for people as pretty as him, so it’s not like there’s any point in turning him in anyway! Best just not to bother, haha!

“Shen Yuan will have to give this Lord records of this world, so that I may know the rest of the laws. Any other information that may be relevant to my search, as well - your family history first.”

Ah, well, actually. Maybe if Shen Yuan turned this guy in, he’d just be sent to a psych ward for being absolutely delusional. Believing you’re actually from a fictional world is certainly grounds for an insanity plea!

“You can borrow my laptop tomorrow if you say please,” Shen Yuan sighs. “Just - use a VPN, or something. I don’t want to get involved in whatever you’re digging up.”

Luo Binghe looks at Shen Yuan blankly for a moment, then clearly decides he doesn't care and turns back to begin exploring the rest of the apartment.

"Hey, hey - don't just - it's bad manners to start poking around without a tour first!" Shen Yuan calls after Luo Binghe, and so begins the most exhausting night of his life.

Every other word out of Luo Binghe's mouth is either a complaint or a demand - Shen Yuan's bathroom is too small and the guest bedroom is undecorated, and he must prepare Luo Binghe's bath for him, and it's rude for Shen Yuan to pretend he isn't honored by such a thing -

Get over yourself, ah! Shen Yuan didn't hire you to be a spoiled kept thing, you know!! And - and even if he *did* bother to draw you a bath, that didn't mean he wanted to catch any glimpses of your freakishly perfect body!!

By the time Shen Yuan has managed to herd Luo Binghe into the guest room and retire to his own bedroom, firmly closing the door behind him, he feels more drained than he remembers ever being. It's worse than when he's been made to socialize at a party, or forced to follow one of his brothers along to the gym. Worse than both of those combined, actually, and Shen Yuan really isn't being dramatic this time!

The next morning isn't any better, either. Shen Yuan wakes feeling barely rested, and doesn't even get to lay in bed for very long before he recognizes the sounds of someone moving around his apartment and has to get up or risk leaving the absolute maniac he let crash with him wander around unsupervised.

It's too late even by then, clearly - by the time Shen Yuan dresses and comes out of his room, he finds that his living room has been completely rearranged. Luo Binghe sits on the couch with a book in hand - a dictionary, it looks like, the sort of book every household seems to have but that no one sane ever actually reads when the internet exists.

"This Lord fixed the miserable feng shui of the room," Luo Binghe says as a greeting. He waves his dictionary around briefly, then adds: "And a laptop seems to be a fine solution to this Lord's quest for knowledge, so long as Shen Yuan connects it to the internet."

"Can you just - just speak normally, for like, five minutes?" Shen Yuan brings a hand up to rub at his temples, not feeling nearly well rested enough to deal with this. "How about a 'good morning, I hope you slept well after you so graciously brought me into your home'?"

Luo Binghe snorts, tossing the dictionary aside and standing to approach Shen Yuan.

"Needy," he says, amused, and reaches out to gently tap Shen Yuan under his chin. It feels horribly like he's being greeted like a pet. "Good morning, little Shen Yuan. Where is this Lord's laptop?"

Shen Yuan bats Luo Binghe's hand away, irritated, and looks away to hide the flush on his face. The flush that is also from irritation, and no other reason at all!

"My laptop," Shen Yuan corrects, but begrudgingly goes to fetch it. Maybe setting Luo Binghe up on it will keep him quiet for long enough for Shen Yuan to at least have a relaxing morning, like setting up a child with an iPad to stop them from crying.

When he returns with it though, Luo Binghe accepts it with one hand and then holds out his other as if waiting for something else.

"...Do you want me to hold your hand while you brave the dangers of the internet?" Shen Yuan asks, but Luo Binghe shoos his hand away when he starts to reach for him.

"This Lord is also supposed to receive a computer mouse," Luo Binghe clarifies.

"How the hell am I supposed to know you're incapable of using a trackpad?" Shen Yuan grouses. "You can't even use a mouse if you're planning on going back to the couch, what would you put it on?"

"Figure it out for me," Luo Binghe dismisses. "This is Shen Yuan's world, he would know best."

"Oh, yes," Shen Yuan mutters under his breath as he turns to go fetch a mouse and - and his little portable standing desk he never uses, he supposes. Irritating. "This apartment is my world, my domain, I know best here, *because it's my fucking stuff,* so -"

"This Lord isn't attracted to complaining," Luo Binghe calls from the couch, staring down at the laptop. "Also, remove your password from my laptop."

Shen Yuan would've chucked the mouse at Luo Binghe's head, if he weren't worried about it messing up the mouse's sensitivity or something. He settles for being particularly rough when setting up the standing desk.

I hope you end up dealing with a wobbly desk leg, asshole, he thinks, and then resolves to change his password at the earliest opportunity when he has to type 'LBH#1f4n' to dismiss the lock screen of the laptop for Luo Binghe. For the Luo Binghe *cosplayer,* really, the character himself is still great! He'll just - he'll make it 'FanOfRealLBH' or something. Ugh.

"Knock yourself out," Shen Yuan grumbles, after he's gotten Luo Binghe set up on a guest profile on the laptop.

"Don't threaten this Lord," Luo Binghe warns, and Shen Yuan drags a hand over his face, sighing heavily.

Then, resolute, he turns and gets the fuck away from Luo Binghe. He's going to have a nice, peaceful breakfast, and then he's going to read some nice, non-PIDW webnovels, and he's going to find the goodness inside of him that will allow him to tolerate Luo Binghe.

…He doesn't even make it to lunch before he's drawn back into the living room, unable to ignore the sound of Luo Binghe treating his laptop like it's meant to be abused. It isn't like it has a mechanical keyboard, asshole, this poor owner of that laptop shouldn't be able to hear you typing from two rooms over!!

“Hey,” Shen Yuan calls, trying to catch Luo Binghe’s attention from the other side of the living room.

Luo Binghe doesn’t even look at him. He’s staring intently at the laptop, probably googling things that will get Shen Yuan put on some sort of government watch list. How to get away with murder in the modern world, or something. Maybe how to frame a perfectly kind and helpful roommate for the murder instead of bothering to take one single fucking ounce of responsibility. Whatever it is, he’s clicking the mouse with so much force that Shen Yuan *knows* he’s going to have to order a new one before the week is out.

Shen Yuan watches Luo Binghe ignore him hopelessly. “At least go on a date with me,” he despairs. “If you’re going to make me suffer through this, at least let me get my money’s worth.”

“This Lord will indulge Shen Yuan tonight,” Luo Binghe dismisses, not even looking up at him. “If you’ve grown embarrassed just sitting there looking at me, leave.”

Shen Yuan perks up despite himself. He’d been planning on just ordering in for his meals today as usual, but if Luo Binghe is willing to do as he says this evening… Well, rather than a traditional date, maybe Shen Yuan could ask for this. After all, for someone as dedicated to roleplaying as this Luo Binghe is, he’s probably at least *decent* at cooking!

“Would you be willing to cook for me?” He asks, trying not to sound too eager.

Luo Binghe glances at him, clearly amused. “This Lord wasn’t aware Shen Yuan wanted to play hard to get after everything you did to drag me home with you. No, handle your own meals; this Lord’s indulgence only stretches as far as it must, and I do not think you need much wooing.”

Shen Yuan stares at Luo Binghe, trying to translate from ‘asshole Lord’ to ‘normal human speech.’

“What the fuck are you talking about,” he says when that fails.

“Shen Yuan is familiar enough with this Lord to know exactly what I’m talking about,” Luo Binghe replies easily.

“Well,” Shen Yuan starts, rolling his eyes, *“I* was talking about making dinner later as opposed to a normal date. Just say yes or no so I know whether to order takeout, don’t talk about weird stuff.”

“I won’t repeat myself,” Luo Binghe sniffs, as if his original answer had meant anything at all.

“Good, because what you already said was insensible. Just answer the question - and if you won’t make dinner, then - then seriously, a date. You’re living here, you agreed!”

The amusement that had previously colored Luo Binghe’s expression fades away. “Pretending you haven’t received an answer just because you didn’t like the one this Lord

gave you isn't cute, Shen Yuan."

"Then maybe bother explaining what you meant the first time," Shen Yuan grouses. "What the hell do you mean I 'don't need any wooing,' ah? Aren't I paying you to do that very thing?!"

"Shen Yuan knows very well why it's unnecessary that I pursue him in such a way," Luo Binghe says. He's still sort of smiling, but without the clear amusement from before the expression is cold and tight, and Shen Yuan feels - it just feels -

Bad. He just feels *bad,* being spoken down to by Luo Binghe, being treated like a fool, like a *pet.* It doesn't even make any sense! If anyone is going to be the pet, shouldn't it be Luo Binghe?! Shen Yuan isn't the one getting paid to be a stay-at-home boyfriend, you know!

Shen Yuan clenches his fists, looking away from Luo Binghe. "Well, clearly I don't," he snaps, frustrated. He'd had a shitty start to the day after a shitty night's rest, and it really only seems to get worse every time he interacts with Luo Binghe. He doesn't have the patience for this. "I hired you. I'm your *customer.* Your - your *boyfriend,* supposedly, even if it's just some stupid fake whim of mine that I never should have followed in the first place."

"Fine, then," Luo Binghe sneers, standing from the couch. He pushes the short standing desk away roughly, the laptop only barely not sliding off of it. "If Shen Yuan wants to play stupid, this Lord is forced to enlighten you."

"I'm not *playing* at anything -"

"Be quiet," Luo Binghe snarls, and Shen Yuan's mouth snaps shut with a painful *click.* "Do not interrupt this Lord as if anything you have to say is more important than me. Do not speak of *hiring* me, as if I owe anything to you in exchange for your sponsorship. As far as this Lord is concerned, the Shen family owes *me."*

Shen Yuan bristles. This cocky, *awful* gold digger! Shen Yuan has read more than his fair share of dogblood stories in his life, and never once has he imagined that the awful sorts of personalities he finds in stories like that could exist in the real world. People just don't *talk* like that, even if they think it!

"I *have* hired you -!" Shen Yuan protests, and Luo Binghe takes several large steps over to him to grab him and jerk him forward.

"Be *quiet,* I said," Luo Binghe hisses.

He'd grabbed Shen Yuan by the jaw, his hand big enough to easily grip Shen Yuan's mouth to keep it shut. His fingers dig into Shen Yuan's cheeks painfully, and despite himself, Shen Yuan feels himself begin to panic. Luo Binghe is not a small man, and he's plenty muscular. He… really could hurt Shen Yuan, if he wanted to.

Alarmed, Shen Yuan reaches up to tug at Luo Binghe's hand, trying to pry it away from him. It doesn't budge. He finds himself a little terrified of Luo Binghe's mood swings - hadn't

Shen Yuan been complaining about being treated like a pet just moments ago? Who gets this mad at a pet, ah!

“Since Shen Yuan wanted an explanation, I’ll give it to you,” Luo Binghe says, watching Shen Yuan’s attempts to free himself derisively. “You’re obsessed with me. You paper your walls with my image. You see me on the street and your first instinct is to attempt to bribe me into letting you into my harem. You protest, but you give in to anything I ask for.”

Shen Yuan startles, going still. He does not keep his PIDW merch outside of his room. Luo Binghe should *not* know about it.

“You -! What’s *wrong* with you, when did you even get the chance to go into my room, you creep?!” His words come out half-muffled, distorted by the tight grip Luo Binghe keeps on his cheeks and jaw, but at least he doesn’t stop Shen Yuan from speaking entirely.

Luo Binghe snorts. “Don’t pretend as if you aren’t honored that I was curious enough to visit you when you slept.”

“Oh, trust me, I don’t need to pretend! That’s weird and gross and a complete invasion of privacy, asshole, what the *fuck* -”

“But your bed is unfit for me,” Luo Binghe continues, as if Shen Yuan hadn’t spoken. “It’s small and smells as if the bedding hasn’t been washed in a month, so clearly you hadn’t been planning on taking me last night.”

Shen Yuan feels his face color with embarrassment, and Luo Binghe smiles at him again when he catches the red on his cheeks, that same awful, mean smile.

“You’re obsessed with me, so there is no need for me to woo you with home cooked meals or pretty words. When you’ve made your bed appropriate for this Lord, I’ll indulge you, and you’ll let me practice on you until I’m satisfied.”

“You - that’s not - I don’t want -”

“You do,” Luo Binghe interrupts. “Of course you do. I wonder if it runs in the family, your desire for me.”

“I don’t -”

Luo Binghe leans in close, his nose pressed right up against Shen Yuan’s. This close, Shen Yuan can count his eyelashes and see the flecks of color in his irises. Luo Binghe’s hand on his face is so warm it almost burns against his skin, and Shen Yuan becomes rapidly aware of the exact feeling of Luo Binghe’s fingers against his skin. The individual pressure points of where his fingers jab into him, the edge of Luo Binghe’s nails that have clearly been filed into claws, even the smell of his skin, so close to Shen Yuan. He swallows thickly.

“You do,” Luo Binghe repeats, voice low. “Look at you - what good would it do for me to try catching your attention when all I have to do is look at you for you to fall apart?”

Shen Yuan has never wanted so desperately to run away. He's never wanted to hit anyone this badly, either. He doesn't think he'd be able to run away if he hit Luo Binghe; Luo Binghe would catch him, and probably -

Shen Yuan swallows. He doesn't actually know what Luo Binghe would do, if Shen Yuan tried to hurt him. He's clearly insane, and insane people are unpredictable.

Luo Binghe finally releases Shen Yuan, leaning back.

"Don't worry, little Shen Yuan," he says, the cold edge to his voice replaced once more with that infuriating tone of indulgence, as if Shen Yuan were something to be entertained. "I find your obsession with me cute, too. I wouldn't tolerate it if I didn't."

Luo Binghe pats at Shen Yuan's cheek, like someone dismissing a child, and Shen Yuan finally manages to snap out of it enough to jerk away from the touch.

"Luo Binghe -!"

"I agreed to indulge you as a reward for your sponsorship, but I won't waste my time where it isn't needed. We'll just get right to business." Luo Binghe pauses, then smiles down at Shen Yuan like they have some sort of private joke. "Shen Yuan just needs to properly prepare his bed first, hm?"

Ah, well. Fuck it. What's the worst that could happen, Shen Yuan getting killed in his own apartment by a guy twice his size?

He launches forward to slap Luo Binghe across the face, hard.

"Fuck you," Shen Yuan seethes, "I'm not - I'm not some desperate loser who hired you for that kind of thing, I'm not even gay! I just - I thought -!"

Shen Yuan breaks off. Fuck. What *had* he wanted from this? What could possibly have been so appealing to him that he had approached Luo Binghe, that he had asked for this, that he had *continued* to ask for this after this stupid LARP enthusiast had revealed that he was just a gold digging asshole who wanted to use Shen Yuan as a stepping stone into high society?

It wasn't just that he wanted some cheesy date pictures with him, no matter how pretty Luo Binghe is. It was - it -

Shen Yuan feels his throat tighten, his eyes burning, and he tucks his head down quickly before any tears can fall. Stupid, stupid, he shouldn't do something as silly as *cry* in front of someone like Luo Binghe. But it was just -

He'd never really liked dating, is all. He'd tried, he really had! He'd gone out a few times with pretty enough girls, and it had always left him feeling so - so off balance, as if he'd stepped into a world he didn't belong in. The girls were pretty, but he'd always felt burned when they seemed to expect a goodbye kiss at the end of the date. Even just talking to them had made Shen Yuan's gut churn, knowing what they wanted.

When he had seen this cosplayer for hire, he'd thought…

Well, maybe it's just been because none of those pretty girls had really shared any hobbies with him. Maybe it's just been because Shen Yuan is some gross weird netizen who gets nervous talking to girls, and that's all that discomfort has been. Maybe if he tried something out with a cosplayer, which was the nerdiest sort of guy to exist, it would work out - maybe if it was a guy, because Shen Yuan isn't attracted to guys and it would let him adjust to the idea of being on a date without being nervous about it.

Maybe if it was someone who acted like Luo Binghe - who only showed the side of him that a potential wife would want to see, who had 600 success stories proving they knew how to make dating tolerable and even *enjoyable* - maybe if Shen Yuan could enjoy dating just this once, he could make things work out afterwards. Maybe Shen Yuan could have some fun with this cosplayer, get all his weirdness out of his system, and then go on a real date with a girl and enjoy that, too.

He was stupid for ever considering it, though.

Of course this cosplayer wouldn't be fun to date. He *isn't* Luo Binghe - he doesn't know the first thing about making someone feel special or cared for. He probably hasn't ever had to do anything beyond *exist* with his pretty face and body and have girls let him have his way with them.

And that - well. Maybe that's actually how Luo Binghe is, after all. It doesn't matter, though, because regardless of how good a method actor this cosplayer is when it comes to wooing a wife, it turns out he's just perfect at acting exactly the way Luo Binghe *would* be towards a man: cruel. Shen Yuan really had been foolish, imagining some fantasy world in which Luo Binghe would ever treat Shen Yuan like a wife of the week, even a fake Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan takes a stuttering breath in, steadying himself. He should get rid of this cosplayer, he supposes, before anything else can go wrong.

When Shen Yuan looks back up at Luo Binghe, though, he blanches at the sight of the large red splotch spreading across his cheek. Shen Yuan hadn't really meant to slap him that hard, ah!

…Well, no, he definitely had. But Shen Yuan had never slapped anyone before, okay! He didn't even know it would make his own hand sting so strongly like that, let alone that it would leave such a mark on the other person! He'd always thought when books described that sort of thing they were being dramatic.

Shen Yuan looks past Luo Binghe at the door to his apartment, then back up at Luo Binghe's bright red cheek. Fuck.

"You… Does it hurt?" Shen Yuan asks, gesturing to his own cheek.

Luo Binghe blinks at him. At his silence, Shen Yuan realizes that Luo Binghe really *hasn't* said or done anything at all about the fact that Shen Yuan hit him and then proceeded to have a tiny emotional crisis right in front of him. He's just been standing there, staring at Shen Yuan, watching him as if he's trying to work something out.

Shen Yuan's a bit surprised, actually - both that this asshole wouldn't immediately jump to arms after being hit like that, and that he hasn't been slapped enough times in his life to know exactly how to respond to such a thing.

Shen Yuan coughs awkwardly, pointing once more at his own face. "Where I slapped you, it's, ah… pretty red…"

Shen Yuan *really* does not want to apologize for it. But if he doesn't address it at all, he'll think about it until he *does* address it, and it'll eat away at him like a particularly bad takeout order that sits in your stomach for too long. He'd wanted to lash out at Luo Binghe, but he hadn't really wanted to *hurt* him. It's - I mean, he's probably just never been told how much of an asshole he is before, is all. And it's not like he can help it if the character he's roleplaying as is an ass to begin with, right?

"Red?" Luo Binghe asks, bringing a hand up to touch his cheek where Shen Yuan had slapped him. "Such a thing shouldn't manage to hurt this Lord, and even if it had, something as trivial as this would have healed by now anyway. Why would it be red?"

Ah, that's right, Shen Yuan thinks to himself, half his pity for Luo Binghe's sad, swollen cheek evaporating in an instant. *This man is a psychopath convinced of his roleplay.*

He sighs. "I won't bother worrying, then. Just - grab an ice pack or something."

Luo Binghe's eyes light up in recognition. "From the refrigerator," he says, sounding almost smug. "This Lord read about how such a thing works. Fascinating technology - Shen Yuan will let me have his refrigerator when I leave."

And there goes the rest of Shen Yuan's pity, too.

"From the freezer," he corrects, sighing heavier this time.

Of course this jerk was sitting around learning how the inner workings of fridges and freezers work while Shen Yuan was losing his mind over his behavior. He'd probably thought if he knew how they worked he could - fuck, who knows with a guy this crazy, maybe he thought he could learn how to repair them and gain entry into more rich people's houses that way? Like the setup to an awful porno where the repairman arrives only to turn out to be a super hot guy.

Ugh, maybe it's a bad idea to let people who get their ideas from porn wander any more freely around his apartment than he already has been.

Shen Yuan turns, stalking into his kitchen and grabbing an ice pack from the freezer. The only one he has has little Mobei Juns printed all over it. Maybe Shen Yuan should have gotten a Mobei Jun cosplayer to date him, instead…

"Here," Shen Yuan says when he returns, shoving the ice pack at Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe takes it from him but doesn't bring it to his face, instead peering down at the pattern on it curiously.

“I see,” he says after a long moment.

“Please keep any observations to yourself,” Shen Yuan mutters. Predictably, Luo Binghe ignores him.

“This Lord misjudged Shen Yuan.” Luo Binghe pauses to hesitantly bring the ice pack up to his face, pressing it against his cheek almost curiously. “It seems perhaps there isn’t a difference to courting a man as opposed to a woman.”

“Of course it’s different,” Shen Yuan dismisses.

A girl probably never would have turned down Luo Binghe’s clear offer to sleep in the same bed together, for one. Shen Yuan’s lucky that his own lack of attraction to men makes it easy enough to see through the way Luo Binghe is just a miserable little man at his core.

Once more, Luo Binghe continues to ignore Shen Yuan in order to say whatever he wants.

“Shen Yuan values his honor like a woman does,” he muses. “Even though you desire me, you won’t lay with me until your idea of a courtship is carried out.”

“You missed the bigger picture where I said I wasn’t -” Shen Yuan breaks off. Forget it. With a method actor like this, he’s probably pretending not to know the word ‘gay’ on purpose.

“No need to worry, Shen Yuan. This Lord will forgive you for this. It is as Shen Yuan had said, after all, that I must practice in more than just how to pleasure a man if I am to win my person. It wouldn’t do to make such a mistake with him.”

Shen Yuan all but rolls his eyes. He pities the fool that this Luo Binghe seems to be targeting - likely some relative of his or a business partner of his family, perhaps, based on Luo Binghe’s insistence on the Shen family specifically. Whoever they are, Shen Yuan will have to take the time to warn them to stay as far as fucking possible away from this guy, even if he manages to shape up from “practicing” on Shen Yuan.

Luo Binghe, unaware of the candle Shen Yuan has lit in his heart for his family, nods to himself. “We will go on your date today, then. This Lord hopes Shen Yuan has prepared something worthy of the occasion.”

Shen Yuan can’t help but to make a face. Feeling a bit bad seeing Luo Binghe’s face clearly hurt is still quite a ways off from wanting to continue their contract.

“Just… leave when your face feels better.”

“Are the courtship rituals here intended to happen as one person leaving without the other?”

“No, just - just leave. Like, permanently. Like, our contract is over, I don’t want to hire you to date me after all.”

Luo Binghe’s expression darkens. “This Lord said he forgave you for the infraction earlier, but don’t test that. I’m going along with you, so - go along.”

“What, would *you* want to date someone who grabs you threateningly any time you displease them?”

“This Lord has been with plenty of women who found no issue with such a thing.”

Shen Yuan grimaces. Fuck, maybe he should just turn this guy into the police after all.

“Well, I don’t like it, and I won’t tolerate it. You didn’t even apologize, you just - you acted as if *I* was the one at fault, which -” Shen Yuan sighs, his words turning bitter. “Which, yeah, I shouldn’t have hurt you either. Whatever. You’re just - you’re mean, and you’re intolerable. So leave. Please.”

“I am the emperor of the combined realms,” Luo Binghe hisses, “I act as is my *right.”*

“Well, I don’t want Emperor Luo Binghe to date me. Leave.”

“You’d rather - You -” Luo Binghe breaks off, looking uncharacteristically rattled. “You’d rather some *other* Luo Binghe?”

Shen Yuan blinks. He remembers his half-thought about hiring a Mobei Jun cosplayer instead, and looks up at Luo Binghe curiously.

“Can you do other characters?”

It’s clearly a personality issue with this guy, but if he had a *different* personality… That’s like, the whole point of roleplaying, right?

“I am the best Luo Binghe there is,” Luo Binghe bites out, furious. “I’m the *only* Luo Binghe, the only real one.”

“What about Liu Mingyan?” Shen Yuan asks, curious. He’d always liked Liu Mingyan, and it wasn’t like this Luo Binghe didn’t have a supple enough chest to try out crossdressing. “If you can’t be a different Luo Binghe, maybe a different character altogether?”

Luo Binghe rears back. “A fake Luo Binghe, or a Liu? You -” He laughs meanly, eyes wild. “It must really run in the family after all. You don’t even understand what you’re missing.”

“Uh huh…” Shen Yuan eyes the ice pack still pressed to Luo Binghe’s cheek. Maybe the cold is getting to him, making him say even stupider stuff than normal. “No, I’m pretty sure I know what I’m asking for, thanks.”

“I am the best Luo Binghe!” Luo Binghe yells, looking nearly crazed. “You’d regret any other Luo Binghe, any other person - anyone would, that’s how it should *be.”*

“It’s not that you’re bad at roleplaying,” Shen Yuan hedges. Clearly, this guy cares way too much about his profession to imply otherwise. “It’s just, ah…”

“What?” Luo Binghe demands. “What could possibly be wrong with me?!”

“I just don’t think the Luo Binghe you’re acting like right now is any good, I suppose,” Shen Yuan says, grimacing. “Even if it’s accurate, and you’re like, the best and only Luo Binghe guy out there - then maybe the character just isn’t all that great.”

“You’re obsessed with me,” Luo Binghe argues, seething. “How could you - even *you,* who surrounds yourself with my image - how could you think I’m not perfect?”

Shen Yuan shifts, uncomfortable. He really does like Luo Binghe as a character a lot. He’s sure that if any PIDW reader familiar with his reviews were present for this conversation, they’d call him a hypocrite in a heartbeat.

Still…

“If it were you,” Shen Yuan asks, “and you met a Luo Binghe that acted just like you do - forget dating him, would you even *like* him?”

Luo Binghe stares at Shen Yuan. His grip on the ice pack has Shen Yuan worrying that he’ll need to clean up a mess caused by the pack tearing, but before he can mourn the potential loss of a limited edition piece of merch, Luo Binghe lets go of it entirely.

Well, more accurately, Luo Binghe hurls it straight at Shen Yuan’s face, but, y’know, details.

“Hey!” Shen Yuan cries, irritated, fumbling to catch it. His face throbs where it hit him, and one of his eyes stings - it must have grazed it before Shen Yuan had processed the incoming projectile enough to blink and flinch away. “You -!”

Shen Yuan cuts himself off. Luo Binghe is no longer in front of him, ready to start a fight. He turns to look at the front door first; with any luck, Luo Binghe has seen himself out.

The sound of the guest bedroom door slamming from further in the apartment dispels that hope, unfortunately.

Fuck. If after an outburst like that, Luo Binghe doesn’t leave… he might really not have another place to go to after all.

Shen Yuan groans, dropping his face into his free hand. He can’t just kick Luo Binghe out right now, either - not after Shen Yuan so clearly shook his own faith in his method acting. If he doesn’t know what to do, or what to act like, or whatever, will a cosplayer like that be able to find another job? Shen Yuan doesn’t want that gold digger latching on to *his* family, but he doesn’t want him to be living on the streets, either, ah…

Shen Yuan will kick him out tomorrow, though, certainly. Tomorrow, for sure…

Chapter End Notes

ahh, thank you all very much for the warm reception to the first chapter! i tried to get this chapter up a bit early as a thank you :> i hope y'all continue to enjoy it!

also, please note that w this new method (posting as i write) there is deffo the possibility that i'm missing more than my usual number of typos, etc - i don't have a beta. so please lmk if you see any particularly egregious issues, and i'll fix them!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Luo Binghe tries a new tactic to deal with Shen Yuan, and Shen Yuan comes to his own conclusions about it all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The morning after their confrontation - the morning of the day that Shen Yuan told himself he'd kick Luo Binghe out for *sure* - Shen Yuan wakes up to the smell of someone making breakfast.

Well, that's at least one of the things he wakes up to, and at least within the first three things he notices upon waking. The first, of course, is what woke him up to begin with: Luo Binghe himself dragging Shen Yuan out of bed like a child caught sleeping past the start of school.

"Wha…?" Shen Yuan mumbles, scrambling to grab his glasses from his nightstand before Luo Binghe has dragged him too far away from his bed to reach. He only just manages, and then has to contend with a whole separate issue of trying to shove the damn things on his face when he's still being dragged by the back of his collar out of his room.

"It's morning," Luo Binghe gives as explanation, not pausing to even let Shen Yuan get his feet under him. "This Lord made breakfast."

"I kind of figured, from the smell of definitely-not-takeout," Shen Yuan grits out, trying fruitlessly to stand up so he isn't being literally dragged behind Luo Binghe to the kitchen. His perfectly appropriate bedtime attire - which is to say, nothing but a shirt and boxers - are not making the trip any more comfortable. He's going to have friction burns on his legs from being dragged across the house by the time Luo Binghe is through with him.

Finally reaching their destination, Luo Binghe lifts him up and deposits him roughly in a chair at the dining room table. It is not Shen Yuan's preferred chair, the one with the most comfortable cushion. Naturally, Luo Binghe sits in that one himself, directly across from Shen Yuan.

"Eat," Luo Binghe commands, steepling his fingers together in front of him and watching Shen Yuan with an expression that would be less out of place in a mafia movie torture scene than a breakfast table.

Shen Yuan sighs wearily. "Do you not believe in the universal right to a lazy morning?"

"Eat," Luo Binghe repeats, baring his sharpened teeth at Shen Yuan.

Fuck, this guy is so weird, Shen Yuan thinks, *but I guess if I'd paid who knows how much money to get my teeth done to be cool like that I'd probably be showing them off all the time too. Ugh.*

Then, Shen Yuan finally looks down at the plates in front of him and is forced to reconcile with the fact that there is no fucking way he's going to turn down eating this, even if on principal he feels like he really should. Yes, he'd been dragged out of bed by the rudest man in roommate history, and yes, that same man had just finished showing off his teeth at Shen Yuan like an untrained dog, but! If Shen Yuan pushed this meal away, he'd really be committing a crime against food lovers everywhere!!

Artfully folded Hua Juan, silky Douhua with a sweet golden sugar syrup, perfectly cooked Jian Bing containing scallions and coriander fresher than anything Shen Yuan ever keeps in his own fridge - it's a feast that spills across four separate dishes and *far* more than Shen Yuan would be able to eat in a single sitting. He'd thought as much even as he'd been dragged out of sleep, but just the smell of it is enough to make Shen Yuan's mouth water, too, and he has to stop himself from just digging in immediately.

Dragging his gaze away from the meal, he looks back up at Luo Binghe suspiciously. "I did not have most of these ingredients when I went to bed last night," he says slowly. Luo Binghe sniffs haughtily.

"This Lord placed an order through the internet through the w-w-w-dot-,"

"If you spell out the whole URL I'll take this stupidly perfect breakfast and shove it up your nose," Shen Yuan interrupts. "Also, don't order stuff unless I approve it, I don't need the doorman getting any weird ideas if you decide to order - fuck, who knows the kind of stuff you're into, just - don't do that."

"This Lord will order what he pleases," Luo Binghe grinds out. "Shen Yuan missed the point. I ordered from on the internet, successfully acquiring quality ingredients without even being able to inspect them, without prior experience using the website or your credit card -"

"My credit card? Luo Binghe, you -!"

"- and made Shen Yuan a breakfast of better quality than he's likely ever had. *Eat it."*

"No, wait, hold on, let's circle back to the part where you stole money from me, because you sure as hell didn't earn that with your shitty -"

"I am more marriable than anyone you've ever *met!"* Luo Binghe snaps. He drops his hands where they'd been steepled in front of him, gripping the edge of the table instead. His nails - also sharpened, and painted black - dig into the finish of the table to leave probably-permanent marks.

Shen Yuan blinks at him. He glances back down at the meal in front of him and mentally reframes Luo Binghe's words from a weird way of bragging about learning to use an online ordering service to an awkward way of advertising marriable qualities. He can almost see the

marriage ad, too: ‘prettiest man you’ve ever seen, adaptable and good with computers, can cook for you!’

Then Shen Yuan remembers that this is a Luo Binghe cosplayer, and there’s no *way* someone is that familiar with Luo Binghe the character without also being horribly familiar with the internet, and that this guy is just either fucking with Shen Yuan or needs serious medical help. ‘First time using an online ordering system or a credit card,’ his ass!

Looking back up at Luo Binghe, Shen Yuan says, “You’re insane. Also, possibly struggling with short term memory issues. I thought I - how’d you word it - ‘didn’t need wooing’?”

“You *shouldn’t,* with how much you-” Luo Binghe breaks off, struggles to find a way to finish his sentence, and ends up just snapping his teeth at Shen Yuan again before pushing up out of his chair and storming away from the table.

He stalks off into the kitchen adjacent to the dining room, circling the room like a dog that needs to be taken on a walk to burn off energy. Shen Yuan watches him with morbid curiosity, trying to figure out if he should take the chance to bolt back to his own room while carrying as much of the clearly delicious breakfast back with him as possible. Ah, he really wants to leave, but the food…

Before he can make a decision either way, Luo Binghe stalks back to the table and drops himself once more into the seat across from Shen Yuan.

“It’s as this Lord said yesterday,” Luo Binghe says smoothly, as if he hadn’t been all but snarling at Shen Yuan a minute ago. “I had misunderstood your modesty. Of course, this Lord is fully capable of meeting and surpassing your standards.”

Luo Binghe grins at him roguishly, the sort of expression stallion protagonists were certainly supposed to use on swooning maidens and the like. Shen Yuan, who is neither swooning nor a maiden, only narrows his eyes suspiciously.

“Ah, I see,” he says, finally understanding what the hell was going on. “You know, if you wanted to deliver an apology breakfast good enough I wouldn’t try to kick you out today, you probably should have started with *actually apologizing first.”*

“Little Shen Yuan really is too cute,” Luo Binghe coos, his smile not even faltering. Shen Yuan’s brow twitches with irritation.

“I’m going to eat this,” Shen Yuan says, picking up the chopsticks that had been laid out for him and waving them menacingly in Luo Binghe’s general direction. “But for the record, I’m doing so because you apparently bought this food with *my* money, and because I *do* deserve reparations for being dragged around, and I do not forgive you until you actually apologize.”

Saying so, Shen Yuan angrily shoves a bite in his mouth, and -

Ah. Fuck. It’s *so, so good.*

“Mmph!” Shen Yuan protests, waving his chopsticks angrily at Luo Binghe some more. Chewing quickly before swallowing, he manages to bite out: “What, you’re desperate enough to try and marry rich through my family, but you can afford professional cooking lessons? What the fuck?!”

Really, Shen Yuan would like to complain more, but at that point he’d already shoved more food in his mouth, so - well. Nothing to be done about it, really!

“Ah, Shen Yuan shouldn’t play around when he knows the truth,” Luo Binghe says with perfect amicability, and Shen Yuan slows his frantic chewing to watch him suspiciously.

Gentle, sweet words paired with that same, pretty smile - it’s really too perfect of an expression, it can only be hiding dark thoughts! Luo Binghe, who taught you that you could pretend like you’ve only ever been lovely and charming if you just got up and left whenever you showed your bad side, ah? Did your little lap around the kitchen delude you into thinking this spoiled young master had forgotten the way you’d dragged him out of bed this morning and snapped your teeth at him, ah??

“Hm,” Shen Yuan agrees, because he certainly knows the truth here - whatever Luo Binghe is trying to butter him up for, it must seriously be intense for this asshole to bother to stoop to blatant flirtation!

“Even if Shen Yuan has already learned of this Lord’s life story through his charming hobbies, though,” Luo Binghe continues, eyes glinting at the very mention of Shen Yuan’s *‘hobbies’* in a way that has Shen Yuan turning an unfortunate shade of red. “Even then, this Lord of course can only be happy to share moments with you as if they are new, as every day ahead of us promises to be even sweeter and newer still. So this Lord is happy to indulge Shen Yuan in his feigned ignorance, and together we may rediscover all the ways in which my life has been shaped to please you, hm?”

…Shen Yuan’s next bite of offensively delicious food falls from his chopsticks.

This… is really too embarrassing, ah! Did this roleplayer grow up on cheesy dramas and never participate in a normal conversation to learn that *isn’t* how people speak? Did he memorize lines from teen romance novels with the idea it would help make proper conversation?? Who *talks* like that, what the fuck??

And - and who talks like that when they’re trying to roleplay as *Luo Binghe,* of all people!?

“Luo Binghe would *not* say that,” Shen Yuan finally manages to say after grasping for several long moments for something to fill the silence.

Luo Binghe’s perfectly charming smile tightens at the edges. “Shen Yuan heard this Lord say it just now, didn’t he?” He pauses, and then his charm is once more dialed up to eleven. It gives Shen Yuan the creeps. “Ah, though perhaps Shen Yuan can’t believe this Lord has been captivated by your sweet, small self in this way, but -”

“Luo Binghe would *not* say that!” Shen Yuan interrupts, horrified at both the butchering of Luo Binghe’s characterization and his own beet red face.

Beyond the embarrassment, Shen Yuan's heart itches a bit, too - Luo Binghe is truly awful at this, but it also… feels a bit like being made fun of, after yesterday. After thinking about how of course no Luo Binghe would care for Shen Yuan like a wife, after -

Well. After those thoughts.

It's fine, though! Shen Yuan's slept since then, and sleep basically cures all wounds! It doesn't even bother Shen Yuan anymore, outside of the irritation at being treated like a wet rag, haha!

What bothers him more than this cosplayer making fun of him, though, is the way this is practically mocking Luo Binghe's character. Shen Yuan might be an understandable target of harassment given his general shut-in status, but Luo Binghe is truly off limits!!

"Luo Binghe is - he's *actually* cool, not some weird, grade schooler's impression of cool!" Shen Yuan cries.

"This Lord is unfamiliar with that terminology and does not care," Luo Binghe says, still wearing that dazzlingly pretty expression even as Shen Yuan gapes at him. "As I was saying, Shen Yuan knows this Lord's origins - the origins of my ability to provide for your every sweet whim and craving, as taught by my mother's hands in my childhood kitchen, and this Lord is of course honored to -"

"If you say one more word like that I think I'll throw up," Shen Yuan warns. "Even when I wanted to hire you to date me, I didn't want - well this is just - Luo Binghe has *three figures of experience!* He wouldn't talk like *that!"*

"Ha ha," Luo Binghe laughs, perfectly charming. "Shen Yuan is almost sounding as if he doesn't wish to court this Lord even after being fed by my own hand, how cute of a joke."

Shen Yuan regards Luo Binghe with a level of mixed disgust and pity he hasn't felt since he'd discovered that guy who'd gotten a life size 3D print of Liu Mingyan and married it. *What a waste of a pretty face to be this weird, ah!*

Mournfully, Shen Yuan pushes the (several) plates in front of him away. Goodbye, heavenly food, Shen Yuan wishes he could have enjoyed you without tasting bile from listening to the weirdo in front of him!

"I'm going back to bed," Shen Yuan says, starting to stand up from the table. "If you're gone before I wake up again, I won't call the cops, or even like, leave a bad review that you do a horrible Luo Binghe impression."

Before Shen Yuan can take even two steps away from the table, though, Luo Binghe has stood up so fast his chair clatters to the ground behind him, tipped over in the suddenness of the motion.

"Eat!" Luo Binghe snarls, the sickly sweet expression on his face falling away in an instant. "This Lord will *not* tolerate -!"

Shen Yuan goes very still very fast, all of a sudden remembering with frightening clarity the way Luo Binghe had yanked him around so easily during their confrontation yesterday and again this morning.

Luo Binghe has gone silent once more, though, and has his eyes screwed shut as if not saying threatening things is a terrible burden on him. Shen Yuan watches carefully as, startlingly quickly, the tension drains from Luo Binghe's face. By the time Luo Binghe opens his eyes to look at Shen Yuan again, it'd be hard to guess from his expression that he'd been barking at Shen Yuan like an angry dog just moments ago.

"Shen Yuan should eat before retiring to his rooms," Luo Binghe says at last.

Shen Yuan looks back down at the food on the table dubiously. "Is it drugged or something? I mean, that's an awful lot of insistence, haha…" He trails off after laughing nervously, not sure if calling out a possible drugging attempt was his smartest move.

Luo Binghe's expression tightens with irritation. "This Lord obviously has no need for the tools of less winsome suitors. Of course, I'll win Shen Yuan's lovely hand with only the -"

"Stop, stop!" Shen Yuan cries before he can launch back into another awful attempt at flattery, "I really can't take it if you keep talking like a middle school drama kid while still looking like *that!"*

"Shen Yuan doesn't have to be shy," Luo Binghe says, but he doesn't continue with anymore flowery bullshit, so Shen Yuan breathes a sigh of relief.

Shen Yuan falls back into the chair behind him, though he doesn't pull the food back closer to him, choosing instead to just watch Luo Binghe wearily. "What do you actually want, Luo Binghe? You clearly aren't going to leave me alone until you get *something* out of this, and I would really, *really* like to get to that point where you do leave me alone as fast as possible."

Preferably without first acting out any sort of scenes that'll actually leave either of us in the hospital or police station, thank you, Shen Yuan thinks irritably, absentmindedly bringing a hand up to rub at his neck. Being dragged around by the collar really isn't a pleasant experience, you know!

"Of course, this Lord only wants to win your heart," Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan only barely resists the urge to gag.

"Ask for something realistic, please," he deadpans.

"I think Shen Yuan will find that this is plenty realistic," Luo Binghe counters, losing some of the sickly sweet charm in his voice.

"I'm not gay nor masochistic, actually. Nor am I into…" Shen Yuan gestures to Luo Binghe vaguely. "...comedy. Pitiful comedy. Comedy made by mocking my hobbies. Not into it."

"You really think this Lord is a poor imitation of himself," Luo Binghe says, almost to himself. "You - I *cooked* for you."

“You *stole* from me! And woke me up and dragged me around!”

Luo Binghe scoffs. “Your sponsorship -”

“No, no - don’t you dare bring that up, I was only going to pay you if you did a good job and didn’t get yourself *fired -”*

“You haven’t even given me a *chance!”* Luo Binghe cries, more desperate than before, and Shen Yuan finds himself falling silent to watch him. “You - how could you even know you’d rather have a different Luo Binghe, if you don’t even allow this Lord to court you? Refusing my food, telling me to be quiet when I speak sweet words to you -”

“If those were sweet words I don’t want to *know* what you think actual drama sounds like,” Shen Yuan grumbles.

“- this Lord hasn’t even taken you to bed, yet!”

Shen Yuan reaches forward to grab one of his forgotten chopsticks and lob it at Luo Binghe’s head. Luo Binghe snatches it out of the air before it can hit him, glowering at Shen Yuan.

“That attitude is exactly why I don’t need to let you have any more chances!” Shen Yuan scolds, as Luo Binghe drops the chopstick back onto the table.

“You dare say ‘any *more* chances’ as if there was even one -”

“There was! There was the time when I found you and you tried to shake me down in broad daylight, and the time you insulted my apartment when I let you stay over, and when you creeped on me in the middle of the night, and when you mocked me and dragged me around *several times -”*

“This Lord hadn’t been trying to catch your eye, then,” Luo Binghe dismisses, sneering, and Shen Yuan bristles.

“Well too bad, you caught it anyway! First and lasting impression made! You can’t just get a do-over because you realized you made a fucking mistake! Many mistakes!!”

“You don’t know *anything,”* Luo Binghe hisses, “This Lord has already won such a ‘do-over,’ and it *will* go well - it’ll go as I *deserve!”*

Shen Yuan snorts. “Considering you clearly have no idea how to be a good Luo Binghe -”

“Give me a chance,” Luo Binghe interrupts, teeth bared. Shen Yuan sighs, bringing a hand up to rub at his temple. It’s way, way too early in the morning for this much bullshit, ah…

“Why the hell do you care so much anyway? You already made it perfectly clear you don’t think I’m worth much beyond my connections.” Shen Yuan pauses, then adds spitefully: “And don’t try to flatter me - it *clearly* pains you to have to speak your ‘sweet words’ to me, since you've dropped them every time I’ve upset you.”

Luo Binghe looks down at Shen Yuan with narrowed eyes, clearly considering.

“Shen Yuan truly is curious,” Luo Binghe mutters. “Begging to be pursued and upset when this Lord doesn’t follow your world’s rules for courtship, yet then more upset when I make an attempt to. Now you sit there and act like some sort of trusted advisor, wishing to speak plainly with me.”

Shen Yuan raises an eyebrow at Luo Binghe. “Well I sure as hell am not your customer anymore, so if you’d prefer ‘advisor’ - sure. I certainly have some advice to give you.”

Shen Yuan is, of course, very familiar with the act of giving all his opinions about bad writing as free advice, after all. And as the leading authority on Luo Binghe, he thinks he has every right to make the call that cheesy roleplaying dialogue falls under the ‘bad writing’ that Peerless Cucumber is qualified to leave reviews for.

Luo Binghe sneers down at him, clearly mocking him in his head, but after a moment he reaches down to brusquely right the chair he’d toppled over and sits back down in it. Frustratingly, he manages to make even a simple dining room chair look like a throne with the way he leans back in it.

“Fine, then,” Luo Binghe snaps. *“Advise me.* If you offer anything of use, this Lord might find it in him to forgive you for your difficulties.”

“Well, first of all, you probably shouldn’t have even let me hire you in the first place - going gay was definitely your first major OOC moment,” Shen Yuan starts without hesitation. Now that he’s given the chance, he actually has a lot to criticize when it comes to this Luo Binghe’s take on the character!

“This Lord certainly wishes he’d found a different Shen to start with, yes,” Luo Binghe snipes. Shen Yuan summarily ignores him.

“You’re pretty enough to be Luo Binghe, and you certainly are decent enough at acting the warlord stereotype,” Shen Yuan continues, tapping a finger on the table in front of him. “That sort of thing directed at romantic partners has a very niche market, though, and -”

Luo Binghe raises a hand to stop him. “Advise this Lord on *something else,”* he says.

“Luo Binghe truly is curious,” Shen Yuan sniffs, mocking Luo Binghe’s own words from before. “Clearly needing help, yet rejecting it when it’s given. As a reminder, *you’re* the one desperate for me to tolerate you, at the moment.”

“Daring to call this Lord *desperate,* Shen Yuan really has no clue,” Luo Binghe spits. “This Lord has found over many years that my life tends to follow a pattern: I need something, some petty obstacle stands in my way, and I win anyway. Often, the answer to the problem I face is placed in my lap, delivered to me by the fate that scorned me as a child.

“The way this Lord sees it, Shen Yuan, is that you are the answer I was given to -” Luo Binghe gestures vaguely around him, “- this current problem. A direct connection to whom I seek, a convenient temporary sponsorship, and devoted to me. I have no reason to be *desperate* for anything you can provide to me, because I know you’ll give it to me anyway.

This Lord is just tired of you resisting this and creating more problems for me, even when I so generously attempt to humor you."

"What, like I'm some sort of easy starter quest that prepares you for the real game? What the fuck?" Shen Yuan shakes his head in disbelief. "Your complaint doesn't make any sense, anyway - despite the weird ass way you worded it, I *have* been 'easy' for you, asshole."

"You have decidedly not been easy," Luo Binghe scowls. "Shen Yuan has been startingly prudish this entire time, and seems to only get worse the more this Lord tries to practice with you."

"That is *not* what I meant when I said -" Shen Yuan cuts himself off, exhausted. He should have known better than to say he was 'easy' in front of someone who clearly had bad porn on their mind 24/7 given their choice of cosplay. "I meant that I've been tolerant of you," he clarifies through gritted teeth.

Luo Binghe scowls at him some more. Shen Yuan makes a face back.

"If you wish to be easy for this Lord," Luo Binghe grits out, "do your job. Your 'starter quest,' if that's what you wish to call it. Just give me a chance to court you."

"I am running out of ways to tell you 'no, I don't like you,' so I'd appreciate it if you stopped asking," Shen Yuan snaps, irritated.

"And I'm telling you that you *will* like me, if only you give me the chance!" Luo Binghe slaps a hand on the table in front of him, and Shen Yuan startles at the sudden loud noise. "You *have to,* because if I can't even get *you -!"*

"That's right," Shen Yuan mocks. "If even the lowly shut-in of the Shen family dislikes you, there's no way you'll be able to score any of my 'betters' you're chasing after."

The chopstick Shen Yuan had thrown at Luo Binghe goes whistling past Shen Yuan's head, embedding itself firmly in the wall behind him. Shen Yuan gets the feeling that it only missed him because Luo Binghe had intended it to.

"Don't mock me," Luo Binghe seethes. "He - I'll know better, for him. The sensibilities of this world, the courtship rituals - already this Lord knows far more than he started with. You just need to let me *practice."*

Shen Yuan narrows his eyes. "You mentioned something similar before - this whole 'for him' and 'the person I'm seeking' stuff. You… just who are you looking for?"

It didn't make sense, after all - in dogblood dramas, gold diggers don't usually care *who* they bag, so long as they have deep pockets. Luo Binghe himself had already made it clear that he only thought of Shen Yuan as a sort of stepping stone into high society, wanting to meet as much of Shen Yuan's family as Shen Yuan would allow. If Luo Binghe was looking for someone specific, wouldn't he have just asked to meet that one person, rather than wanting to scour Shen Yuan's family tree?

“A scholar,” Luo Binghe answers, still baring his teeth at Shen Yuan. “Someone who dotes on his students, but has a history of cruelty. This Lord never bothered to learn his birth name, and this world doesn’t use courtesy names - I will know him when I see him.”

Shen Yuan… doesn’t actually know anyone like that in his family.

“And they’re for sure a Shen?” When Luo Binghe starts to growl at him, he quickly holds his hands up in defense. No need for the middle school wolf boy act, ah! “I’m just making sure! It’ll be a waste of effort on both our parts if it turns out I’m completely unrelated to this guy. Most of the main branch is in the family business of entertainment, so I don’t really know anyone who’s been a teacher.”

If Shen Yuan has gone through all of this for someone who isn’t even related to him, he’ll really lose his mind!

“He might have been caught for lechery or murder and thrown in prison by now,” Luo Binghe adds helpfully.

Shen Yuan looks at him incredulously. “You… do you like this guy or hate him??”

Luo Binghe looks away, expression vexed. “I’m going to marry him,” he says firmly, as if he hadn’t just implied the man in question was a criminal.

“Right, so - you’re looking for one specific guy, who you’re *sure* is a Shen, but you don’t know the real name of, nor the real profession or history of…” Shen Yuan sighs. “I see. You’re an idiot who can’t read the credits of a movie, then?”

“What?”

“You imprinted on some guy you saw on TV acting as a villain, right? Someone from my family who acts rather than manages talent. He was just done up sooo pretty in the movie makeup, and you wanted to meet him, but you didn’t stick around for the credits so only know him by whatever name he had in the movie or show or whatever, so you couldn’t easily search to see if he was doing any meet and greets.”

“Shen Yuan, that -”

“And instead of, y’know, *just searching on Baidu for who played the role,”* Shen Yuan interrupts, fuming, “I ended up dragged into this because you thought it would be better to manually search through all the Shens around until one looked familiar, what the fuck?!”

“Stop making assumptions,” Luo Binghe snaps. “This Lord met this person and knew him personally, not through one of this world’s digital plays.”

“And yet you know nothing about them,” Shen Yuan says, rolling his eyes.

“This Lord knows more about that person than anyone, don’t you *dare* presume I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“By all means then, share - I don’t know if you noticed by now, but I am trying really, *very* hard to figure out who I can dump you on so you aren’t my problem anymore, so I’d love to know.”

“Shen Yuan is missing the *point,”* Luo Binghe growls. “This Lord needs to find that person, but before I meet them I must finish practicing with you anyway. I will not allow that meeting to go poorly.”

Shen Yuan drags a hand over his face, groaning. “How the hell do you get so obsessed with a guy you don’t even know?” He mumbles, half to himself.

“This Lord could say the same about Shen Yuan, with the way he had been keeping a shrine devoted to me before we ever met.”

…Forget it. Shen Yuan isn’t even going to bother arguing that point.

More importantly, the faster he figures out what - or who, he supposes - this cosplayer wants, the sooner he can get rid of him. He feels a bit bad about planning on dumping this asshole on some supposed member of his family, but… well, they all tend to keep better security than Shen Yuan does anyway, so it’s fine! Probably!!

So: an actor, probably, but one that Luo Binghe would have met in person in a context where they still would have been ‘acting’ - or at the very least, wouldn’t have been in plain clothes and using their name freely. A positive context, or else Shen Yuan really doesn’t know how a man could go around saying they want to marry another man without any hesitation!

Thinking of the sorts of side projects his family tends to keep outside of their normal business, the only one that fits…

Ah. Shen Yuan… suddenly feels a bit bad.

“You… did you happen to meet this person as a child?” Shen Yuan asks hesitantly.

“Of course I did,” Luo Binghe huffs. “This Lord said it earlier, but don’t play dumb about what you know of my life.”

Shen Yuan tries not to soften too much at the confirmation. Some years ago, the Shen family had held a yearly acting bootcamp, of sorts. It had been a charity project designed to help children in unfortunate circumstances pursue their otherwise unaffordable hobbies: the people running the camp would dress up like whatever character they’d acted as that year that had been the most popular and, alongside other volunteers, help the kids put on small improv shows or the like. To Shen Yuan’s knowledge, that camp hadn’t been held for the past few years after the main sponsor had gotten too old to continue running it, but before then it had gone on for long enough that Luo Binghe could’ve been a part of it when he was younger.

Put together with Luo Binghe’s clear passion for acting (roleplaying) and the universal knowledge that actors couldn’t get a real break in the industry as a one-trick pony (evil emperor roles *only* for this Luo Binghe!)...

Ah, it's actually a bit tragic! Luo Binghe must have had a rough childhood but been touched by the care one of his acting teachers at this camp had given him - but of course, being a child, he wouldn't have thought to ask for the actor's real name and been happy to go along with their character persona. And of course the actor in question would've been playing a villain. It explains perfectly why Luo Binghe is so good at being mean and so *awful* at everything else: he must have liked this teacher so much he never bothered to learn from anyone else!

But only learning to be mean wouldn't have gotten Luo Binghe anywhere in the industry - not through traditional tryouts nor through the unfortunately common backdoor of schmoozing your way into a good role. With that door closed, and with the camp no longer active, Luo Binghe wouldn't have any easy way to reconnect with that teacher that had such an impact on him.

Although… reconnecting by attempting to marry that person…

Well, it wasn't any of Shen Yuan's business, haha!

More importantly, Shen Yuan has finally figured Luo Binghe out - even all of his comments about 'practicing' with Shen Yuan make a bit more sense now, even if they were still said rudely. Of course Luo Binghe would want to be able to deliver a perfectly sweet reunion scene when he meets his old mentor, rather than let that treasured teacher find out their old student never graduated past the mean personalities they taught them! Ah, Shen Yuan really is good at figuring these sorts of things out!!

(Across the city, Shen Er-ge and Da-ge shudder. They quite suddenly wonder if they shouldn't have coddled their Yuan-er so much growing up, always telling him that his ability to read people is much higher than it really is…)

"Alright," Shen Yuan says, much more confident now that he knows how to handle Luo Binghe. It's probably enough to just treat him like a sad child, after all - he has the backstory and tendency to throw childish tantrums to fit it! "This Yuan-ge will help you out."

"..."

Shen Yuan smiles at Luo Binghe, putting his best 'generous savior' face on in the face of his silence.

"...Just how old does little Shen Yuan think I am?" Luo Binghe asks, incredulous. "If one of us is meant to be 'ge,' it would be -"

"Me," Shen Yuan says firmly, pretending not to see Luo Binghe's ugly expression. "Anyway, I have some sense of who you're looking for, now, though I'll have to look into the records to figure out who exactly it might be."

Luo Binghe somehow manages to look both more and less relaxed. Ah, he must really be nervous about meeting this old teacher of his… Shen Yuan was right after all, when he'd first pegged Luo Binghe as the sort of guy who is really quite pitiful!!

Satisfied, Shen Yuan reaches forward to tug the breakfast dishes back towards him. He may have lost his chopsticks, but some of this is finger food!

“We’ll start with this,” he says. “Binghe’s apology breakfast to me.”

“You are to refer to me as your *lord* -” Luo Binghe snarls, and Shen Yuan hushes him.

“Be good,” Shen Yuan scolds. “Anyway, starting with this - apologize.”

“I cooked,” Luo Binghe says through gritted teeth, as if that were enough of an apology on its own.

“And you’re very good at it,” Shen Yuan placates. “Binghe is very talented in the areas he’s practiced, I’m sure once you practice the other things you’ll be - well, maybe not *good* - that is, you’ll probably still - hm. Well, it’ll probably work out if you do your best!”

Shen Yuan grins at Luo Binghe, giving two thumbs up. This Yuan-ge is rooting for you!! You’ll be able to move on from the tragic childhood memories you’re clearly trying to get closure for soon enough!!

“Are you mocking me?” Luo Binghe asks in disbelief.

“Well, Binghe is the one who said that he needed practice being good to people,” Shen Yuan sniffs, dropping his thumbs up. He may have some pity for this poor boy, but he has no problem making sure Luo Binghe knows all his faults are his own.

You might have a sob story strong enough to weaken this young master’s heart of steel, but it won’t ever be good enough to make him forget about being dragged out of bed and yelled at so much, ah!!

“Anyway, here’s our first lesson: acts of kindness are very good apologies, but only if you actually say sorry!” Shen Yuan pokes at his plate. “Now, go ahead and apologize properly so your Yuan-ge can eat.”

Luo Binghe spends another half second watching Shen Yuan, clearly torn between being offended and confused, before he gets up and stalks out of the dining room.

“This Lord won’t sit there and tolerate this sort of treatment,” he mutters as he leaves. “I’ll practice later.”

“Ah, skipping homework won’t help you any!” Shen Yuan calls after him. “How are you supposed to learn if you stop ‘practicing’ once you get a bit of critique, ah? Binghe, wait - hey, Luo Binghe -!”

…

Well, oh well. Shen Yuan had probably scolded him enough to get the message across; he’ll deal with the rest after eating!

Chapter End Notes

insert my usual comment here about how im very behind in comments and will respond to them all asap!! i've been enjoying reading everyone's reactions to the fic so far, but unfortunately i don't always have the time it takes to both reply to them all + get the next chapter out on time ;;

those of y'all who consistently publish fics as you write them while keeping to a schedule, ur so powerful,,,

oh, also, i've updated the chapter count! this is just an estimate for now based on my outline vs how quickly i'm getting through all the scenes i want, but hopefully it isn't too far off from the final count :>

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> Luo Binghe begins puppy training - or, boyfriend training? Eh, it's probably the same thing.

Chapter Notes

> quick tw for a brief appearance of a homophobic background character this chapter. stop at "Shen Yuan can't help the frustrated little sound -" and resume at "They're almost at the exit now, just a bit further -!" to skip!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first step to reforming Luo Binghe is, of course, getting to the point where he isn't an embarrassment to be seen with in public. Even if Shen Yuan has to haul this stubborn cosplayer there kicking and screaming, he *will* get him into some normal clothes!

"This is a waste of this Lord's time," Luo Binghe grumbles, though he watches closely as Shen Yuan scrolls through page upon page of clothing options. "None of this is fit for an emperor."

"What about -"

"No," Luo Binghe mercilessly shuts down, and Shen Yuan sighs and scrolls on from the perfectly reasonable pair of sweatpants he'd been about to suggest.

"Why can't you be even a little willing, ah…"

"This Lord has seen on the Internet how those in power dress in this world. Don't try to make a fool of me."

Shen Yuan lets out a long suffering sigh. As if he hadn't *started* with formal wear! "You're too damn big for that sort of thing to work."

"It lets you choose a size," Luo Binghe sniffs. "Just choose a bigger one."

"I tried that - you *watched* me try that! Premade sizes just don't go up that far for professional wear!" Shen Yuan angrily clicks on to the next page, hoping desperately that something will come up that will appease Luo Binghe.

“Maybe you just measured wrong,” Luo Binghe says, examining his nails. Nails that may as well be called claws, honestly, for the way this edgy cosplayer has filed and painted them! “Maybe you should measure me again.”

Shen Yuan stops browsing the online shop to turn and stare at Luo Binghe incredulously. “Sorry, I must have heard you wrong, because it sounded like you just asked me to voluntarily step into your damn *mouth* . No, I won’t measure you again, not after the way you behaved the first time!”

If Shen Yuan ever has to go through that again, straining to try and reach a hand around Luo Binghe to wrap the tape measure around his generous chest without actually making physical contact, feeling Luo Binghe’s smug look boring into him the whole time… Shen Yuan whips his head away from Luo Binghe to stare back at the laptop. His face is red out of fury alone, okay!!

“Hm. If Shen Yuan would like to try and fit in my mouth, I’m willing,” Luo Binghe says conversationally.

“You’re unbelievable,” Shen Yuan mutters. “Look, just - you can’t get formal clothes in your size unless we get it custom made.”

Luo Binghe shifts to prop his cheek up against a fist. Unfortunately, since he’d done this with the arm that had previously been slung over the back of the couch behind Shen Yuan, this puts Luo Binghe’s face distressingly close to Shen Yuan’s. Shen Yuan tries to be subtle about scooting even further into the end of the couch he was already pressed into.

“Are you sure you can’t just measure me again? That seemed to work well.” Luo Binghe sighs. “Although I suppose such a thing couldn’t be reused easily with -”

Shen Yuan slaps a hand over Luo Binghe’s mouth. “Can you *please,”* he grits out, “pay attention to the current task and not your fruitless quest to find better seduction techniques.”

Luo Binghe glowers at Shen Yuan, and Shen Yuan very quickly takes his hand away before he can find out how easily Luo Binghe’s sharpened teeth could bite off a finger or two.

“I don’t *like* the current task,” Luo Binghe snaps. “It’s beneath me.”

“Well, it’s beneath *me* to go outside with someone in full cosplay! I haven’t fallen *that* far,” Shen Yuan says. He pauses, then adds: “Also, literally everyone in my family has more self esteem than I do, so whoever you’re looking for won’t even give you the time of day unless you dress normal.”

“Lying doesn’t become you,” Luo Binghe sneers, “I’m perfectly aware how appreciative Shen Yuan is of my appearance.”

“It’s a very faithful cosplay,” Shen Yuan allows.

Luo Binghe grins, all sharp teeth and silent threats. “As this Lord thought, it -”

“And,” Shen Yuan interrupts, “You’ve worn it for the past three days straight.”

“This Lord is unable to access his qiankun pouches,” Luo Binghe grits out, his mean smile a bit strained. “Which, I’ll remind you, was supposed to be *your* job to fix - this Lord’s disconnection from his powers.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “And following that narrative, I bet all your ah, fancy cultivator charms have stopped working, right? All the talismans you’d have sewn into your robes to keep them clean and not smelling of sweat?”

“This Lord has been told many times he smells enticing,” Luo Binghe says, clearly insulted.

“In this world, people think being *clean* smells enticing.”

“I’ll have you gutted for your insults, once I’m done with you,” he seethes, and Shen Yuan nods along indulgently.

“Sure. Now, until we can get you to a tailor - grey or black sweats?”

The second step to reforming Luo Binghe is - according to a quick google search on how to manage preschoolers - positive reinforcement.

After Shen Yuan has found some temporary sets of clothing for Luo Binghe, he adds one other thing to the online order: a magnetic board with a set of cute little star magnets. Once the order has arrived, and Luo Binghe has been wrestled into his new clothes -

(“I have absolutely no desire to watch you change,” Shen Yuan had been forced to say, both hands slapped over his eyes.

Luo Binghe, who had started stripping right in the middle of the living room, hummed. He sounded incredibly doubtful. “What has this Lord said about lying, hm?”

“Your old teacher would be *so* disappointed in you if he knew you were going around trying to have sex with random people in the middle of the day.”

There’d been a thud, as if Luo Binghe had tripped while stepping into his new pants, and then -

“The people of this world… you don’t have sex everytime someone gets changed here? What’s the point, then??”

…Shen Yuan had refused to even acknowledge that Luo Binghe had said anything.)

- Shen Yuan sets up the magnetic board on the fridge. Luo Binghe already likes the fridge, so he’ll like the things that get put on the fridge, too, right??

“Binghe, come listen to your Yuan-ge for a second, okay?” Shen Yuan calls into the living room.

Luo Binghe looks up from the laptop only long enough to bare his teeth at Shen Yuan. “This Lord will *not* answer to that.”

“You just did,” Shen Yuan sing-songs. Then he pauses, squinting at the laptop screen from across the room. “...Luo Binghe, please tell me you aren’t researching guns.”

“Machine guns seem particularly useful,” Luo Binghe says, completely casually. “Buy me one.”

“Absolutely fucking not,” Shen Yuan cries, horrified. “Besides the fact that it’s illegal here, what would you even *do* with - no, actually, I don’t want to know.”

“A prince in your country of Nigeria has requested this Lord’s assistance through electronic mail. Surely if I simply go to his country and eradicate the threat he faces, he will reward me more than if I simply transferred his money into my account briefly.” Luo Binghe pauses, looks back up at Shen Yuan, and adds: “Also, I’ll need your bank account details to give to him.”

Shen Yuan feels himself lose about 5 years of his life processing that. A Nigerian prince asking for help over email…

Quickly, Shen Yuan marches over to Luo Binghe and slams the laptop shut on his fingers. Luo Binghe startles, rearing back and snarling at Shen Yuan.

“You -!”

“You are going to be forbidden from checking your email again until you complete a basic internet safety course.” Honestly, it would be an insult to the Peerless Cucumber name if someone under his roof remained this gullible!

“I’ll be perfectly safe if you get me a machine gun,” Luo Binghe sniffs, extricating his fingers from the closed laptop.

“So you can, what, shoot the computer if someone insults you?”

Luo Binghe thinks about that for just a second too long. Shen Yuan lets out a long-suffering sigh and silently resolves to put parental controls on Luo Binghe’s account on the laptop when he isn’t looking.

“Just come into the kitchen for a second, okay?”

“No.”

Shen Yuan feels his eye twitch. “Can you *please* come into the kitchen with me?”

“Hm. Beg more.”

“You are actively becoming less marriable by the second,” Shen Yuan says, teeth gritted.

Luo Binghe snaps his teeth at him, but gets up from the couch to stalk into the kitchen. Shen Yuan follows him with a sense of victory that is probably completely overblown.

“Thank you,” he says, following Luo Binghe into the kitchen and walking over to the fridge. “This -” Shen Yuan gestures at the magnetic board, “- is your Reward Board.”

Luo Binghe stares blankly at him. Shen Yuan resolutely grabs one of the little star magnets and places it in the column of the board that has been clearly denoted as the ‘Good Boy Binghe’ side.

“That little star means you did a good thing by coming with me to nicely listen to what I had to say,” Shen Yuan says, proud.

“Everything this Lord does is good,” Luo Binghe sniffs.

Pointedly, Shen Yuan grabs a large handful of magnetic stars and starts lining them up on the side of the board that had been labeled ‘Needs (Major) Improvement’ with a bright red marker.

“And *these* stars,” he continues, “are for acting like a rabid dog all the time, and being fooled by the oldest spam email in the books, and for scaring the delivery man who so nicely came to bring you your new clothes.”

“This Lord had not given him permission to approach me so casually,” Luo Binghe defends, smacking a hand down on the kitchen table.

“He approached the *front door,”* Shen Yuan corrects, adding another star to the ‘Needs Improvement’’ side. “There’s another bad star for acting like you’re so much better than everyone, also.”

“This Lord *is -”*

Shen Yuan holds up another star magnet threateningly. It’s a very good thing he had decided to order so many of them.

Luo Binghe makes a face at him. “This is stupid. I will not entertain it. Your stars mean nothing to me.”

“If you fill up your ‘Bad Binghe’ side first,” Shen Yuan continues, ignoring Luo Binghe completely, “I’ll blacklist your name in all the Shen businesses, and make sure you can’t ever approach us again.”

Luo Binghe goes obediently quiet, though his eyes drift over to the kitchen knives consideringly.

“And if you fill up the ‘Good Binghe’ side first, I’ll deem you more or less marriable and take you to meet your old teacher.”

Luo Binghe snaps to attention. “You found him? Take me to him this instant or I’ll -” Luo Binghe cuts himself off, looking at the Reward Board and clearly thinking hard about all the

stars on the ‘Bad Binghe’ side before he settles back into his seat. “...This Lord will wait longer before going to that man.”

Shen Yuan snorts. Well, at least Luo Binghe is able to recognize when he’d completely fail at something, in the end.

“I didn’t find him just yet anyway,” he says. “I have some ideas, but I’m waiting to hear back from one of the talent managers before I make any conclusions. You have at least another three to five business days to learn how to be decent company.”

“Useless,” Luo Binghe scoffs, turning away. Shen Yuan slaps another star onto the bad side of the Reward Board.

The third step to reforming Luo Binghe is, of course, to curse that no one has written a guide book to parenting adults that kin murderous stallion protagonists and then immediately give up on having a step-by-step list all together.

Who needs a checklist anyway! Shen Yuan already figured out the positive reinforcement training technique, he can just keep using that! What a dog in training really needs is practical experience anyway - not everything can be done in an isolated training environment, you know! It’ll be fine!!

“Here,” Shen Yuan says, dropping a couple very important and dignified bags onto Luo Binghe’s lap. “These are called fanny packs, everyone rich and famous wears them for their casual wear. Very stylish, everyone will want to marry you if you wear them.”

Luo Binghe picks up one of the fanny packs and examines it dubiously. “What is the point of giving this to me? This Lord won’t be made your packmule.”

“You’ll be carrying your own things,” Shen Yuan clarifies, waving a hand dismissively. “We’re going out today, so I can’t just stand next to the fridge putting stars in the correct column every time you do something of note.”

A look of understanding crosses Luo Binghe’s face, and he tries to shove the fanny packs back at Shen Yuan. Since he’s sitting on the couch while Shen Yuan isn’t, it’s easy for Shen Yuan to simply step back and avoid him.

“Shen Yuan’s silly little *stars* have nothing to do with me. Carry them yourself if you want them.”

“I’ll carry the undistributed ones,” Shen Yuan allows. “But once you earn a star, it’s yours. You have to carry them yourself, because -” *Shen Yuan really won’t remember how many good or bad stars you’ve earned by the end of the day, and can’t bother to wear something as stupid looking as two separate fanny packs himself!* “- you have to carry the weight of your actions with you.”

Luo Binghe looks at Shen Yuan incredulously. Shen Yuan looks back smugly - he really nailed that one, that could've been a line from a real self-help book!

"Anyway, the black one is for the bad stars you earn, the red one is for the good ones. You're very welcome for choosing colors that match your aesthetic."

"I didn't thank you," Luo Binghe sniffs. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. He'd noticed, thank you!

"Just put them on - we're going on a date now, and this will be easier than shoving everything in your pockets."

Luo Binghe's expression sharpens with interest. "A date? Has Shen Yuan decided to admit to wanting to marry me after all?"

"Don't delude yourself," Shen Yuan deadpans.

"Hm. Well, no matter. A date suits this Lord just fine anyway." Luo Binghe shoves the fanny packs off to the side and pulls a notebook from - somewhere. The couch cushions?? Luo Binghe, don't go stashing things away in weird places in Shen Yuan's apartment! "I have a list of things to practice on Shen Yuan for a date."

Luo Binghe starts to flip through the notebook, which… now that Shen Yuan looks at it, isn't that -

"Luo Binghe," Shen Yuan says, putting on his best dangerous bitch smile. "You had better tell me that you haven't been *writing* in my special edition disciple days Luo Binghe notebook, or I'll -!"

"It has my name all over it," Luo Binghe dismisses, absently tapping a finger on the cover of the notebook, where 'Luo Binghe' has been written in big red letters over a drawing of Luo Binghe in his Qing Jing Peak days.

"It has *Luo Binghe's* name all - no, wait, it - *that isn't yours!!"*

Luo Binghe summarily ignores him. "Ah, here - Shen Yuan will take me to a movie theater and purchase seats in the back of the show room. The lights go out once the movie has started, and I'll -"

Shen Yuan makes a strangled cry and snatches the notebook from Luo Binghe's hands. He frantically scans the page Luo Binghe had been reading from: getting handsy in a movie theater, getting handsy on a ferris wheel, getting handsy in the taxi on the way home…

"You -!" Shen Yuan moves to smack Luo Binghe over the head with the notebook, remembers how much money he'd spent on getting such a limited and old piece of merch, and ends up just waving it around in the air threateningly instead. "You wrote about having *sex!* In my special edition disciple days Luo Binghe notebook! *Disciple days!!* Look how cute he is on the front cover, and you - after I'd kept it in pristine condition all this time - *profaned it!"*

Luo Binghe snorts. “Shen Yuan is truly too naive. I assure you, I’d thought of such things at that age.”

Shen Yuan takes a slow breath and immediately gets to work on forgetting that Luo Binghe had said such a thing. This cosplayer wouldn’t know the truth about the cute, *real* Luo Binghe anyway!!

“This is fine,” he says aloud. “I can carefully remove the pages and burn them.”

“Don’t presume you have the right to burn my notes,” Luo Binghe scowls, and Shen Yuan bristles.

“They should be burned no matter what they were written on! These are the worst ideas I’ve ever *seen* for a first date, ah!”

“The online internet -”

“- is full of desperate virgins who never manage to actually have a successful date! Of course you shouldn’t take dating advice from them!!”

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at Shen Yuan. “Shen Yuan posts to the internet discussion forums too - this Lord has watched you.”

“Don’t watch me -!”

“So,” Luo Binghe interrupts, “Aren’t you just a desperate virgin too? What would you know?”

“I’m - that is - it’s a *choice!”* Shen Yuan flushes, and brings the notebook up to partially hide his face. “And anyway, unlike you clearly do, I don’t hold Proud Immortal Demon Way up as the standard for how to get a girl, so I at least know *something!”*

“Like what?” Luo Binghe leers at him, finally standing up from the couch so he can get in Shen Yuan’s space.

“Like,” Shen Yuan says, trying not to falter with Luo Binghe’s sharp teeth so close to his face now, “How it’s usually better to assume your partner *won’t* put out on a first date, especially if you’re dating seriously!”

Luo Binghe narrows his eyes suspiciously. “I think,” he says slowly, dangerously, “Shen Yuan is simply scared of sex.”

“Well *I* think you’re just - just scared of *no* sex!”

There’s a moment of heavy silence lying tense between them, Shen Yuan still clutching his defiled notebook and Luo Binghe’s lips pulled back to show off his teeth. Just when Shen Yuan feels like he might not be able to take the tension anymore, though, Luo Binghe huffs and pulls back, collapsing back onto the couch.

“Fine, then, *Yuan-ge,”* Luo Binghe says, clearly mocking him. “What would be your idea of a ‘good’ date?”

Shen Yuan sighs, letting his shoulders relax a bit. “Put on your fanny packs and follow me - I’ll show you.”

By the time they arrive at the aquarium, Luo Binghe has already earned three ‘Bad Binghe’ stars. One was, of course, for the incident back at Shen Yuan’s apartment before they left - though Shen Yuan wished he could’ve given *two* bad stars for having defiled his precious disciple Luo Binghe merch in such a way. The second was for growling at some poor, clearly terrified guy on the subway who happened to step just slightly too close to Luo Binghe, and the third was for trying to dump the bad stars he’d already earned down a sewer grate.

Shen Yuan can at least take comfort in the image of the largest, prettiest man he’s ever seen walking around in public in sweats and two fanny packs stacked on top of each other, at least. A little bit of secret humiliation goes a long way for people as conceited as Luo Binghe is, after all.

“Give me your hand,” Shen Yuan says once he’s paid for their tickets and led them inside the aquarium.

Luo Binghe stares at Shen Yuan’s outstretched hand with undisguised suspicion. Shen Yuan wiggles his fingers impatiently.

“What, no star?” Luo Binghe grumbles, and Shen Yuan snorts as he realizes Luo Binghe had been expecting him to hand him one.

“Did you do something mean while I wasn’t looking?” Shen Yuan asks, sarcastic up until the moment he sees Luo Binghe taking the question seriously. “Ugh - don’t answer that. No star, just hold my hand.”

Reluctantly, Luo Binghe takes Shen Yuan’s hand. Shen Yuan hums, pleased, and interlaces their fingers.

“Date stuff,” Shen Yuan says by way of explanation. *And ‘making sure my pet murder dog doesn’t wander off’ stuff too,* he adds mentally.

Luo Binghe’s expression turns a bit smug. Shen Yuan resolutely ignores him and thinks even harder about how this is necessary to keep Luo Binghe on a leash.

“Good dates should be based on what you know the other person will actually enjoy,” Shen Yuan says, tugging Luo Binghe deeper into the aquarium. “All I know about you, though, is that you probably fantasize about getting away with murder and also that you like - ah, adult activities way too much.”

“Shen Yuan is intimately familiar with this Lord’s life, don’t pretend.”

"So," Shen Yuan continues, pinching meanly at Luo Binghe's hand, "I'm doing this assuming you chose to kin a character you actually have interests in common with. And since I'm not taking a probably-would-be-murderer to, like, an axe throwing range or anything, that leaves us with this."

Shen Yuan stops them in front of a glass viewing plane that a small reef shark has come up to. It's unbearably cute, this small, sharp-toothed little thing!

"Fish?" Luo Binghe clarifies, peering at the various creatures in the large tank dubiously. "They don't seem to be for eating…"

"Of course not - they're for looking!"

"Hm. I don't see how this is 'something I would enjoy,'" Luo Binghe says, starting to pull back away, clearly intending to walk out of the aquarium the way they came.

"Ah, just wait, just wait! Didn't I say I don't know much about you, hm? I'm doing my best, ah…" Shen Yuan tugs on Luo Binghe's hand again, trying to pull them to follow the slow path the reef shark is taking along the glass. "Luo Binghe - the character, I mean - he always liked the parts of the world where the border between the human and demon realms felt thin, and both species lived side by side."

Luo Binghe stops resisting being pulled along, looking down at Shen Yuan with an unreadable expression. "And?"

"The ocean is kind of similar, don't you think?" Shen Yuan gestures to the tank, glancing away from the reef shark to glance over at some of the larger ones further away. "I mean, I suppose it's not really any different from the way a jungle or other diverse forests work, but when you have so many different kinds of creatures all living together, it's... just sort of neat, I suppose."

Luo Binghe looks back at the large tank in front of them. A particularly ugly fish comes up to the glass in front of him. Luo Binghe bares his teeth at it, and Shen Yuan has to swallow his laughter at the sight.

"This Lord never would have collected such an ugly thing for my own ponds," Luo Binghe grumbles, and Shen Yuan sighs, beginning to pull Luo Binghe deeper into the aquarium. He has a feeling Luo Binghe's acquiescent mood won't last forever, and he wants to at least get to the penguins before they get kicked off the premises!

"Yeah, well, home ponds aren't usually designed for maximum diversity."

"What would *you* know about designing a palace's ponds?" Luo Binghe sneers, and Shen Yuan sighs.

"Hold on, hold on," he mutters, stopping and using his free hand to dig out one of the star magnets. Handing it to Luo Binghe, he says, "Into the bad fanny pack, please."

Luo Binghe bristles. "For what reason? This Lord asked a *question."*

“Asking questions is fine, acting like a middle school bully is not. What’s even with that sort of tone, ah? If you disagree, just say so, or you can correct me - *nicely.”*

Luo Binghe’s expression doesn’t get any less ugly, but he does shove the star magnet into the black fanny pack. Shen Yuan nods in approval, but unfortunately…

Well, to put it nicely, Shen Yuan had been right that Luo Binghe’s relative agreeability wouldn’t last long.

It’s smaller things at first - the sorts of things Shen Yuan had been expecting, really. Glaring at little kids to the point they tear up when they look too long at Luo Binghe’s unusual long and wavy hair, or banging on the glass of the aquarium tanks looking like wants to pick a fight with the whale shark on the other side even after Shen Yuan had patiently explained not to touch the glass.

Luo Binghe seems more and more irritated each time Shen Yuan shoves another bad star at him, but he still takes them. He even earns a good boy star too, at one point! …Though, admittedly, being impressed that Luo Binghe had held a door open for a lady who’d been sending flirtatious looks Luo Binghe’s way for the past ten minutes was a little…

Ahem. Well, anyway, it was still going *mostly* fine, right up until the moment Luo Binghe pulled out a knife.

It was very clearly one of the knives from Shen Yuan’s kitchen, one of the smaller ones that could be hidden in one of Luo Binghe’s fanny packs. It is also very clearly being held like a weapon and not like a cooking knife.

“Luo Binghe,” Shen Yuan hisses, a hand on Luo Binghe’s arm as he tries to encourage him to drop the knife. “Put that away *right now,* or -!”

“Or *what,”* Luo Binghe snaps, not taking his eyes off the person in front of them who’d offended Luo Binghe so badly he’d pulled out the knife in the first place. “I tolerate your disrespect because I still have use for you, Shen Yuan, but I will not take it from others.”

You call your behavior towards me tolerance *??* Shen Yuan thinks a bit hysterically, but he doesn’t get the chance to reply.

“Ah? Is the pretty boy sensitive about his dumb tattoo?” Asks the asshole in front of them, and Shen Yuan can’t help but turn his glare to him, too. “If you were going to pull out a knife anytime someone told you that you look like an idiot with that thing on your forehead, maybe you shouldn’t have gotten it.”

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at him. “My heritage is not -”

“Luo *Binghe,”* Shen Yuan hisses again, now tugging a bit frantically at his arm. “Binghe, if security sees, they will *kick us out!”*

“So? They’re just fish, Shen Yuan,” Luo Binghe dismisses. He spares a glance towards Shen Yuan, expression almost mocking. “If you want to see more, we can go to the supermarket.”

“Even you cannot possibly think going to look at dead fish at the store is romantic!” Shen Yuan scolds, still trying to keep his voice at a whisper. “Ruining dates is not marriable behavior!!”

“What ruin?” Luo Binghe scoffs. “Isn’t it this fool in front of me who’s disrupted us?”

Shen Yuan can’t help the frustrated little sound he makes in the back of his throat. This idiot -!

“If I’ve ruined your gay little date, I’ll happily celebrate,” laughs the guy in front of them meanly.

Shen Yuan feels the blood drain from his face. That - he isn’t - he was just trying to help Luo Binghe, who needed practice going on dates, and it -

Well. Clearly Luo Binghe doesn’t care about this practice anyway. There isn’t any reason for Shen Yuan to stick around and have baseless insults thrown at him.

“I’m leaving,” Shen Yuan says, turning on his heel and starting to walk away as quickly as possible without being too rude. They had at least gotten through most of the aquarium, so the exit shouldn’t be too far away…

“Shen Yuan,” Luo Binghe calls after him. “Don’t you dare abandon me -”

“I’m *leaving,”* Shen Yuan calls over his shoulder. That Luo Binghe, so casually calling Shen Yuan’s full name out in front of - after that man had just accused Shen Yuan of -

“Shen *Yuan,”* Luo Binghe calls again, and Shen Yuan can hear him turning to follow after him.

Good, Shen Yuan thinks, casting a glance behind him to verify that Luo Binghe didn’t stick his knife into anybody before chasing after Shen Yuan. They’re almost at the exit now, just a bit further -!

“You dare to lecture me on what a good date is, and then leave part way through?” Luo Binghe calls after him, and Shen Yuan walks even faster. “Ha! Clearly I never should have bothered to listen to you, you -!”

“That date was over the second you pulled out a knife,” Shen Yuan hisses, spinning to face Luo Binghe as soon as he’s made it out of the building. Luo Binghe comes to a stop, too, standing in the doorway. Shen Yuan makes a frustrated sound and reaches out to tug Luo Binghe just one step further outside so the automatic door can at least close behind him.

“Over, and yet you still think it’s appropriate to manhandle me?” Luo Binghe asks, clearly insulted.

“Oh, you -!”

Shen Yuan gives up. He turns back away from Luo Binghe. “I’m really leaving,” he says, frustrated. He’s going home and he - he doesn’t even care if Luo Binghe follows him back!

“This Lord told you *not to abandon me -!”*

Shen Yuan ignores him and walks faster.

Luo Binghe doesn’t stop following him home, nor does he stop pestering him. He doesn’t pull the knife back out even as Shen Yuan ignores him, but he does almost cause a confrontation at the train station when he tries to jump the gate to follow after Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan has to circle back and tap his card again for Luo Binghe just to avoid getting caught up in anything.

By the time they make it back to Shen Yuan’s apartment, he’s begun to wish very much that he hadn’t paid for Luo Binghe and had just let him get accosted by security. But then Luo Binghe would have had that knife out again, and, ah -

Behind him, still standing in the entranceway of the apartment, Luo Binghe yanks the fanny packs off and throws them to the ground.

“Pick those up,” Shen Yuan snaps, not turning to look at him. “Pick them up, and put the stars on the Reward Board, and let's see how close you got to getting yourself blacklisted, hm?”

Luo Binghe snarls, but does scoop the fanny packs back up and stalks into the kitchen with them. When Shen Yuan follows, though, he sees Luo Binghe slapping all the magnets onto the ‘Good Boy Binghe’ side, even going so far as to move the magnets that had already been on the bad side onto the good one.

“I’m tired of indulging you with this,” he fumes. “Always, *always* I get told I am wrong. Who are you to judge my actions - *I* decide my own worth, *no one* else.”

Shen Yuan scoffs. He walks up to the fridge and squeezes next to Luo Binghe so he can reach the board, shoving magnets back onto the bad side of the board. Luo Binghe spins away, clearly frustrated, and moves back across the room away from Shen Yuan.

“I’m fascinated by what the hell you think you want a marriage for, then,” Shen Yuan mocks. “Don’t you want -”

“I just want him to *love me!”* Luo Binghe yells, and Shen Yuan falls silent, turning away from the fridge to watch Luo Binghe carefully. “What does it matter if I’m good or bad - he should - he should love me *especially* if I’m bad, it’s -!”

Luo Binghe falls silent. He looks especially resentful, and very much like he wishes he hadn’t said any of that. He casts his gaze around the room, clearly looking for a distraction.

What he finds instead is something to vent his frustrations on.

Shen Yuan watches in slow motion horror as Luo Binghe’s gaze locks onto Shen Yuan’s shelf of nerdy, expensive, *delicate* anime figures in the living room.

“No,” Shen Yuan says, horrified. Luo Binghe is already moving, though, too quickly for Shen Yuan to catch up with. “Don’t - Luo Binghe, those -!”

Luo Binghe smacks his arm across the whole shelf, sweeping most of the figures off of it onto the ground. None of them survive the fall completely intact. The sound of thousands of dollars of carefully curated and dignified character figures breaking…

Shen Yuan… has to spend a long, quiet moment considering what to do next. He's pissed the hell off, but he can probably just repurchase most of those. He wants to help Luo Binghe - he's already tried this hard already, he's already looked into his family's old "poor kids' acting bootcamp" enough to have read enough tragic stories from the kids involved that looking at Luo Binghe and listening to him talk about always being judged as bad…

He also knows that he cannot keep giving Luo Binghe infinite 'last chances.' Luo Binghe had pulled out a *knife* today, just to come home and start destroying Shen Yuan's things like a disgruntled cat.

Shen Yuan hisses out a pained breath through his teeth. He casts a glance back at the Reward Board on the fridge: after Shen Yuan had shoved the stars back into their rightful places, it left the 'Needs (Major) Improvement' side with very little space left in it. Even just one more star would be enough to fill it up.

"Okay," Shen Yuan mutters under his breath. "Okay."

He grabs one of the remaining unassigned star magnets and turns back to Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe watches him carefully, his expression…

Well. It looks very much like he expects to be told how 'bad' he is again.

Shen Yuan hardens his heart as best he can. "This would be the last bad star you'd need to fill that side of the board," he says.

"Of course it is," Luo Binghe scoffs. "How unsurprising that Shen Yuan would make sure this Lord is completely 'bad' within a single day."

"Don't blame me for your own -"

"I was only defending myself earlier," Luo Binghe snaps, interrupting Shen Yuan. "That man insulted -"

"Pulling a knife on someone that insults you is *not* self defense," Shen Yuan cuts in.

"How this Lord defends himself is none of your business, little Shen Yuan," Luo Binghe dismisses, and Shen Yuan can't help but to bare his own teeth right back at Luo Binghe.

He's just - for as hard as he's trying for Luo Binghe, for Luo Binghe to still be like this - it really makes him mad, okay!!

"It *is* my business! It's my business when you cause a disruption on a date that you were on *with me!* It's my business when you're living with me, and using my knife, and you getting arrested would inevitably come back to bite me too!"

"We can go on another date, that one -"

“No,” Shen Yuan snaps. “This -” he holds up the star magnet, “- was it for you. If you want to get out of this, do it properly.”

Luo Binghe moves to snatch the star from Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan jerks his hand closer to himself, out of Luo Binghe’s reach.

“I’ll make you another meal,” Luo Binghe tries. “Go on another date with me.”

“Food won’t fix *this,* Luo Binghe,” Shen Yuan gestures down at the broken figures. “Fix the thing you fucked up, don’t just try to bribe your way out of it.”

“They’re broken,” Luo Binghe dismisses. “They can’t be fixed.”

Shen Yuan snorts. “Not without you ever trying,” he says.

“Even if I try,” Luo Binghe insists. “They’re *broken.* You can’t fix something that’s already been broken, Shen Yuan.”

Shen Yuan considers Luo Binghe for a moment. His expression… is really quite ugly, but it isn’t directed at Shen Yuan.

“I guess I'll just have to teach you all about the wonders of glue, then,” Shen Yuan says finally.

“You’ll still be able to see the cracks where they broke,” Luo Binghe argues, but Shen Yuan has already turned to head back into the kitchen to rummage through the junk drawer for some super glue. “Shen Yuan, don’t ignore me -!”

“I’m listening,” Shen Yuan says, pawing through the drawer. Ah, that’s where his Bingpup bandaids went…

“You *can’t fix -”*

“You can at least *try,”* Shen Yuan interrupts, holding up the super glue he’d finally found. He looks over at Luo Binghe from across the counter separating the kitchen from the living room. “Try to fix it, or give up and accept being ‘all bad,’ if you want to put it in your words.”

“This Lord is *not* at the mercy of your judgment for his actions,” Luo Binghe snarls.

Shen Yuan sighs, walking back into the living room. He holds out the star magnet in one hand, and the super glue in the other.

“No,” he says. “You’re at the mercy of your own choices. What will it be?”

Luo Binghe’s expression turns worse. He doesn’t say anything, though, only turning to look back at the broken figures on the ground. Shen Yuan follows his gaze. It really is a disaster…

“...You…”

Shen Yuan hums, looking back up at Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe swallows, then tries again.

"...You really thought I'd enjoy the aquarium?"

Shen Yuan sighs again. It's exhausting to even think about the aquarium right now, but it's not any worse than thinking about Hatsune Miku's shattered twin tails scattered across his floor either, he supposes.

"I don't know, Binghe. I really don't know much about you. I made a guess."

Luo Binghe doesn't reply. Shen Yuan watches him for a moment longer, but… he can't help the way he feels a bit disappointed. He shouldn't have expected Luo Binghe to magically be better, to all of a sudden try to fix his messes, and yet -

"Bring me more glue," Luo Binghe says. "This isn't enough."

Shen Yuan blinks at him. Luo Binghe bares his teeth at him.

"I said to bring me *more glue,"* he repeats. "And I'll -" Luo Binghe breaks off, gesturing to the broken figures on the ground.

"...You'll fix them, then?"

Luo Binghe glares at him. "I won't put your foolish star trinket on the board," he says.

Ah, that's… Shen Yuan feels a rush of relief. He really, really didn't want this to be it, for Luo Binghe to have failed his new training in only a single day. Even if Luo Binghe fails tomorrow instead, it would be better than failing right now.

Shen Yuan reaches out to drop the super glue in Luo Binghe's waiting hand. Then he keeps reaching, stretching onto the tips of his toes to pat briefly at Luo Binghe's head.

"Good," he says. "Work hard, okay?"

Shen Yuan drops back onto his feet, his hand falling back to his side, and grins tentatively up at Luo Binghe.

Luo Binghe doesn't return the smile, but Shen Yuan doesn't miss the slight flush dusting the tops of his cheeks.

Very good, Shen Yuan thinks, unspeakably relieved. *If it's like this… it'll be alright.*

Chapter End Notes

uh oh! shen yuan used 'earnest praise'! hope that doesn't awaken anything in bingge!

the joke about lbh falling for the scam email was totally inspired by this absolutely hilarious post about lbh being easily fooled by internet scams. lost my mind over this tbh LOL

i'm slowly catching up in comments! but heads up that it might well be 3 weeks instead of 2 until the next chapter - i think i might have to change my outline up a bit for the next one, but i'm not sure how just yet, so please be patient for now! 🙇

edit: this fic now has fanart!! from dubbedcorn, a selection of super fun meme-y drawings inspired by ch2 and ch4! binggeyuan's expressions are so so good here, go check it out and give it some love!!

edit: more fanart! from xn3city, bingge shoved in some too-tight sweats and armed with his dual fanny packs! go take a peak, sy looks especially playful in this one!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> The various misadventures of Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe's attempts to fix the anime wifu figurines. It goes very well, of course.

Chapter Notes

> ahhh, so so sorry for how long this chapter took to get out!! on the plus side, some things have recently cleared up for me, so i should be able to focus more on this fic to prevent such a delay from happening again 🙇‍♂️💦

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe is hopelessly terrible at gluing the broken figurines back together. Not that Shen Yuan would be any better, he supposes, but he figured someone who could make a cosplay as detailed as Luo Binghe had would be better with small delicate things than Shen Yuan is!

At the very least, shouldn't he have the patience to last longer than five minutes without complaining!!

"This is foolish," Luo Binghe says for what must be the third time in as many minutes. *"Shen Yuan* is foolish, for wasting this Lord's time."

Shen Yuan idly flicks a magnetic star across the table at Luo Binghe's head. Just like the last several times Shen Yuan has done this, Luo Binghe instinctively whips a hand up to catch it and throw it right back at Shen Yuan, and in doing so lets go of the piece of Miku's twin tails he'd been trying to glue back together.

Shen Yuan snorts. This has not gotten any less funny from the first time Shen Yuan did this and Luo Binghe nearly blew a gasket from being tricked into letting go of the pieces he'd been trying to hold in place. He makes sure to carefully collect the star after dodging it so that he can throw it at Luo Binghe again the next time he inevitably complains.

"You signed up for this," Shen Yuan reminds him, smug. Luo Binghe scowls at him as he carefully lines back up both pieces of the neon blue acrylic to hold in place while the glue settles.

"You *blackmailed* me into this," Luo Binghe corrects. Shen Yuan holds up the star again threateningly, and Luo Binghe snaps his teeth at him but does not move his hands away from

the broken figure pieces again.

“Honestly, you wouldn’t be having nearly as hard of a time if you weren’t so easy to provoke,” Shen Yuan says, amused.

“I wouldn’t be having *any* difficulties with such a trivial task if this Lord weren’t *handicapped,”* Luo Binghe snaps back. “Normally, I could of course dry the glue instantly with a bit of qi.”

“Ah, right, of course,” Shen Yuan says, trying not to roll his eyes too obviously. “Any excuses that aren’t part and parcel of your roleplay obsession?”

“This Lord never makes excuses -”

“Right, right, forget I even asked.” Shen Yuan sighs. Method actors - all the same, ah!

“Well, *don’t* forget what this Lord asked,” Luo Binghe sniffs. “When will you get me better glue?”

“When you finish using what you have,” Shen Yuan says, in the same rote voice he’s used the past four times Luo Binghe has asked this.

“You called this *super* glue, and yet it’s -”

“Very super, I assure you.”

“- very much of mortal make. If I can’t use my qi, get me glue that will dry quicker.”

Shen Yuan props an arm up on the table, resting his chin on his hand as he watches Luo Binghe work. This… it really feels like a child whining about being stuck at the kitchen table doing their homework!

“You’re a grown adult with an unusual interest in made up stories,” Shen Yuan mutters, referring both to Luo Binghe’s tragic acting career and his clear interest in bad webnovels and subsequent roleplaying. “How are you incapable of keeping yourself from getting bored when you have to sit still?”

Luo Binghe bristles. “This Lord does not have the fool’s privilege of simply allowing his mind to *wander,”* he spits. “Shen Yuan wouldn’t understand, never bothering to keep his mind alert to danger.”

Shen Yuan makes a show of dragging his eyes around the room, searching for so-called threats. Obviously, the only one he finds is sitting across the kitchen table from him trying to glue broken wifu figurines together.

Said danger glares at Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan sighs again.

“Alright, fine. I’ll entertain us both, then.” Shen Yuan takes out his phone, opening his reading app. “What do you want to read?”

“War accounts. Continued history of this world.”

“Rejected.”

“Un- reject it.”

“The correct answer is romance,” Shen Yuan says, pretending not to see Luo Binghe fuming in righteous mutiny. “Since you’re so keen on educational literature, obviously we’d read from the genre you need the most education in.”

“This Lord knows how to romance someone,” Luo Binghe dismisses.

“Seduction is not romance, Binghe -”

“Ah, so Shen Yuan *does* admit to being seduced by this one -”

“- and you’re not even good at seduction, so it’s a moot point anyway,” Shen Yuan finishes, turning up his nose at Luo Binghe.

“Liar,” Luo Binghe says, baring his teeth.

“What lie? Anyone would be vaguely interested if someone as objectively attractive as you got in their face, that isn’t a skill! Seduction is the sort of thing that inspires - ah, *those* sorts of feelings - in someone who wouldn’t normally feel them about you!”

“So in other words, Shen Yuan would normally be attracted to me, so he can’t claim to have been seduced by me,” Luo Binghe concludes smugly.

Flustered by how obviously incorrect such a statement is, Shen Yuan once more chucks the magnetic star at Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe, finally having learned his lesson, does not drop the broken figure pieces and instead snaps the star out of the air with his too-sharp teeth. Spoilsport.

“Don’t distract me,” Shen Yuan scolds, watching Luo Binghe spit the star out with mild disgust. “Your idea of romance is pulling out a knife during a date - *obviously* you don’t know what you’re doing!”

Luo Binghe clicks his tongue, irritated. *“Men,”* he hisses. “If my teacher had been a woman, this would be much easier.”

In many ways, Shen Yuan can’t help but think. Aloud, he says, “Whatever makes you feel better. Now, which one: *The Super Skyward Leaping Disciple and His Two-Faced Sweetheart,* or *Help! I’ve Unlocked MAX Stats and The Dungeon Boss Proposed To Me!?”*

“...Are those supposed to be book titles?” Luo Binghe asks, disbelieving.

“This is just what the best ones are called,” Shen Yuan says defensively. “I didn’t name them.”

Luo Binghe curls his lip in disdain. “The one about the two-faced lover, then.”

Shen Yuan nods, opening that one up and skipping back to the first chapter from where he’d left off. Not that he reads this sort of story frequently, of course - it’s only that even the most hardcore of adventure fans needs to sample other genres in order to keep their palette fresh!

Shen Yuan begins reading the webnovel aloud, obviously making sure to strike the perfect balance between his own dignity and ensuring that each character gets a unique voice. Luo Binghe listens with mild disinterest as Shen Yuan gets through the introductory monster battle - a bit uninspired when it came to the monster’s design, but with an action sequence that made creative use of the protagonist’s abilities! - but doesn’t bother to interrupt.

Shen Yuan has just begun to settle into the idea of comfortably spending the rest of the afternoon like this, when -

“...he turns to look at who’d called out for him, absently wiping at a splatter of blood on his cheek. There, across the field, is -”

Shen Yuan stops. There, across the field, is a description of a woman in enough prose it takes several paragraphs to get through. One of those paragraphs is dedicated to the way the protagonist can garner her current mood by the relative perkiness of her breasts.

Obviously, since Luo Binghe is having Shen Yuan call him *Luo Binghe,* he must have plenty of experience reading webnovels that have awful descriptions of women. He probably wouldn’t even bat an eye if Shen Yuan read this aloud. And Shen Yuan *could* read this aloud! It isn’t like he’s embarrassed by it, obviously! The monster fight he’d just read to Luo Binghe had clearly been cool enough to justify why Shen Yuan would have read a book that also contained this sort of trash!!

…But. Well. Isn’t it just that Shen Yuan is looking out for Luo Binghe? He’s trying to help this poor, down on his luck actor figure out the right way to romance someone! Even if that someone is a man, he shouldn’t be trained into thinking this is a normal way to think about someone! What if Luo Binghe took this as encouragement to try and read his old teacher’s nipples for emotions??

Truly, it would just be irresponsible for Shen Yuan to read this out loud to him!

“- ahem. Apologies. It says, ‘there, across the field, is a woman.’” Shen Yuan frantically scrolls through the next couple pages to find where the dialogue starts back up. “She greets him - um, normally. ‘Hello, how do you do,’ she says, and -”

“Does she?” Luo Binghe interrupts, clearly far more interested that he’d been only a minute ago during the arguably far more interesting monster fight. “This Lord didn’t quite catch that. What does she say upon meeting this insipid little man?”

“He isn’t *insipid,”* Shen Yuan corrects. “He just took down a Five-Footed Lion by thinking to blind it with the reflection of his sword glare off the nearby river. That’s -”

“Pathetic,” Luo Binghe concludes on his own.

Shen Yuan glares at him. “Well, how would *you* have done it, then?”

“It has five feet; obviously it has a side it favors. Unbalance it and slit its belly.”

“He can’t be *that* powerful yet,” Shen Yuan scolds. “It’s only the start of the story. If he were capable of winning with brute force alone already, there wouldn’t be anything interesting for him to learn later.”

“This isn’t interesting either,” Luo Binghe dismisses. “Perhaps to someone like you, who’s never seen real power… Hm. This Lord will demonstrate for you later, once his cultivation has returned.”

“If you try to do anything of the sort, I can guarantee you’ll end up out on the curb,” Shen Yuan scowls.

“No,” Luo Binghe says simply. “Shen Yuan will be *very* impressed with me.”

…In the end, it’s probably best not to start arguments with children. Pointedly, Shen Yuan looks back at his phone.

“Anyway, she approaches and says ‘Hello, how are you,’ -”

“Hm? Hadn’t she said ‘how do you do’ before?” Luo Binghe grins at him sharply.

“I must have misread,” Shen Yuan grits out.

“Shen Yuan makes *such* a habit of lying to this Lord,” Luo Binghe says, his mean smile not wavering. “Isn’t Shen Yuan trying to help me? How am I to learn if you don’t read it properly?”

Shen Yuan makes a face. Luo Binghe, why couldn’t you just take a hint, ah! This well-read young master would’ve done just fine editing the story in real-time for you if you hadn’t called him out on it!

“There’s nothing to learn from -” Shen Yuan gestures generally in the direction of his phone with his free hand, irritated. *“this.* It’s just - it’s ramping up! I just happened to forget that it started out this trashy, it won’t be this bad the whole time. I’m only saving your ears until then.”

“How noble,” Luo Binghe deadpans. “Read it properly now.”

“There isn’t anything *proper* about what she says here!”

Luo Binghe narrows his eyes at Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan narrows his eyes back, scrunching up his nose and sticking his tongue out for good measure.

Then, because Luo Binghe seems to fall back into the manners of an untrained dog at the slightest inconvenience, Shen Yuan is forced to scramble backwards out of his chair as Luo Binghe lunges across the kitchen table.

“Wha - hey!!” Shen Yuan loses his balance almost instantly, his chair getting tipped backwards in his rush to push himself away and taking him down to the floor with it.

Luo Binghe, barely missing as he tries to swipe Shen Yuan’s phone out of his hands, all but growls at him. “Give it here!”

“It’s *my* phone, you already hog my laptop most days!”

“If you won’t read it properly, I’ll read it for you!” Luo Binghe straightens before leaping over the table to land by Shen Yuan’s head. “Give it to me.”

Shen Yuan frowns, clutching his phone to his chest. “No way!”

Luo Binghe reaches down and grabs the phone. Shen Yuan, refusing to let go, ends up being hauled up along with his phone. Damn this man’s stupid strength, what the fuck!!

Rushing to get his feet under him properly without losing grip of the phone, Shen Yuan tries to tug the phone back to himself and out of Luo Binghe’s grip. “What the fuck is your problem, ah! You weren’t even that interested in the story!!”

“I don’t appreciate information being withheld from me,” Luo Binghe says, lips pulled back in a mocking snarl. “Now, *give* it to me.”

Luo Binghe shakes the phone, shaking Shen Yuan’s whole body along with it as he tries to hold on. Inevitably, Shen Yuan fails, yelping as he tumbles back to the ground from the followthrough of how much force he’d been trying to put into getting his phone back. Shen Yuan rushes to stand back up, wincing at the ache in his knees as he goes, but Luo Binghe has already rounded the table again to put it between them.

“Ah,” Luo Binghe says, finding the spot Shen Yuan had left off on. “Really, Shen Yuan was holding out on me.”

“Ignore that part! It isn’t -”

“She approaches him with caution. Though the townsfolk whisper about her wickedness, He can really only see one truly wicked thing about her - the indecency of her clothes. Her stockings -”

“Stop!” Shen Yuan cries, face aflame as he flails forward, desperately trying to reach across the table for the phone. “Stop stop stop!! That part - it’s not part of the good romance part yet, you - just skip ahead some, I -”

“- her stockings lay unevenly, one of them slipping down to reveal cream colored skin, soft like kneaded bread -” Luo Binghe continues, holding the phone over his head far out of Shen Yuan’s reach. He glances back down at Shen Yuan, grinning wickedly. “Isn’t this just the same as the romance stories this Lord already knows?”

“That -! That doesn’t count!” Shen Yuan bristles, trying to edge around the table to get to Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe casually starts edging around the table in the opposite direction. “That’s

all just - male gaze - bad editors - funded by a bunch of lowlifes with nothing better to do than - I mean, the guy who wrote this probably hasn't even *seen* a woman, it's -"

"And such a man is meant to have something I can learn from?" Luo Binghe asks mockingly. He waves the phone in Shen Yuan's direction, clearly amused as he watches Shen Yuan jump for it.

"Well, you - I - hey!! I said it gets better, didn't I?!"

"Alright, then," Luo Binghe says. He turns his attention back to the phone. "How do I move further?"

"No, wait -!"

"Ah, found it. This Lord can't deny the convenience of standardizing online website orientations the way this world has; even a fool could learn it easily." Luo Binghe easily dodges another swipe from Shen Yuan, tapping at the phone briefly. "Here, chapter 407 - surely, this is far enough?"

"That's *too* far!" Shen Yuan cries, horrified. "You - you'll miss all the plot build up! The intrigue! The monster fights!"

"I don't commonly find monster fights to be necessary for romance," Luo Binghe muses. "Often, it's the parts that come after that are good for such things."

"Well -! That's just stupid!" Shen Yuan splutters, frighteningly out of breath after chasing Luo Binghe around the kitchen table for such a small time. *"Obviously* monster fights would be good for romance!"

Luo Binghe snorts. He raises one eyebrow at Shen Yuan. "If I brought you a monster, then, would you let me practice sleeping with you?"

"Seduction!! Is not! Romance!!" Shen Yuan all but yells, making a final lunge for his phone.

He misses, of course.

He lands with one foot on unstable ground, a small plastic tube caught beneath him. There's a small *splat* noise as the tube is squished as it slides under his foot, and then Shen Yuan is slipping, once more careening towards the floor.

Please, Shen Yuan thinks, half desperate and half resigned, *can I just have one good day, ah!*

Then Shen Yuan's path downwards is roughly brought to a halt. Luo Binghe catches him with one hand on the back of his collar, like someone catching a kitten by its scruff before it leaps off a table.

"...Thank you," Shen Yuan says, voice strained, after a moment of Luo Binghe holding him that way.

Luo Binghe hums, shakes Shen Yuan briefly, and finally lets him go. He even slides his phone back into Shen Yuan's hands, grinning smugly down at him.

…Suspicious.

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe says sweetly, sending a horrified shiver up Shen Yuan's spine. "It looks like we've run out of your terrible glue."

Shen Yuan glances down at the ground. The tube he'd stepped on had been the container of super glue, displaced onto the floor sometime during their scuffle. Next to it is a very obvious puddle from when Shen Yuan had all but stomped its contents out onto the ground.

When Shen Yuan casts a glance to the kitchen table, he finds that the figure Luo Binghe had been slowly gluing back together has, miraculously, not even moved an inch.

...Even a single good hour would be enough, Shen Yuan mentally revises, already mourning his knees from what he knows is going to be a miserable hour of cleaning that glue up.

"Alright," Shen Yuan sighs, resigning himself to his fate. "I have some things I want to pick up from the store anyway."

"Fresh meat and vegetables," Luo Binghe suggests pleasantly. "And perhaps Shen Yuan should find himself a 'real' romance novel while I get real super glue."

Shen Yuan swats at him. Luo Binghe, unfortunately, dodges easily and slips away to put on his fanny packs to go out.

In a small mercy, the supermarket is not busy when they arrive. After the disaster at the aquarium yesterday, Shen Yuan would rather never let Luo Binghe within five feet of another human being ever again, but this is better than nothing.

(As for why Shen Yuan couldn't have just left Luo Binghe at home - obviously Shen Yuan would have preferred to! But Shen Yuan had recently read an article about how important enrichment activities were for puppies - er, growing children - ah, that is -

Well! Clearly, they were important to plan out for troublemakers like Luo Binghe!)

As Shen Yuan picks up a grocery basket to take into the store, Luo Binghe comes up beside him, positioning himself just slightly in the way so that Shen Yuan couldn't properly walk into the store without squeezing past him.

"...Yes?" Shen Yuan asks, sighing heavily.

Luo Binghe glares down at him. "Don't you have anything to offer me?"

Shen Yuan peers past him into the store, then down at his empty basket. Luo Binghe, they haven't even made it into the store yet, what could there be to give you!!

Irritated, Luo Binghe extends a hand expectantly. Shen Yuan blinks dumbly down at it for a moment - surely, this isn't a request to hold hands?! - before Shen Yuan gets the idea.

"Ah, thank you!" Cheerfully, Shen Yuan passes the shopping basket over to Luo Binghe.

"...This is not what I -"

"It's very kind of you to offer to hold it for me, here here, have a good boy star," Shen Yuan interrupts, patting at Luo Binghe's hand to encourage it to stay wrapped around the basket handle as he digs into his own pocket for one of the magnetic stars. *You offered to hold the basket Luo Binghe, no taking it back now!!*

Luo Binghe makes an odd face, but silently accepts the star. Shen Yuan nods, satisfied, and pats at him once more before brushing past him into the store. In and out, they can be efficient with this! Get Luo Binghe back out of the public eye before he does anything atrocious!!

"We'll get the glue first," Shen Yuan decides, heading in that direction. That way, if Luo Binghe acts up later, they can cut the trip short while still getting the most important thing! "There'll probably be puzzles or crafts or something in the same aisle, maybe you should - Binghe?"

Shen Yuan stops, turning around to look back at Luo Binghe. He's stopped in the entranceway of the supermarket, head turned in the direction of the produce section. At Shen Yuan's call, he glances back at Shen Yuan.

"...Are you coming…?"

"What season is it here?" Luo Binghe asks, an odd tone to his voice.

"Oh, I don't really know anything about seasonal fruits or whatever," Shen Yuan says, also glancing towards the produce section. "I mean, if they have it, it's probably fine? Don't be picky, ah!"

Shen Yuan's mother had always been the same way, claiming that fruit never tasted as ripe as it does when it's grown "in season" instead of imported from elsewhere. But for Luo Binghe, who is currently relying on Shen Yuan to house and clothe him - can such a man really afford to be picky about what country grew his grapes?!

"Picky? With this sort of selection…" Luo Binghe trails off, then finally turns back to Shen Yuan. "Your family only deals in entertainment? Not in commerce?"

"I mean, we have like, limited merchandise -"

"Useless," Luo Binghe sighs, clicking his tongue and turning to walk away from Shen Yuan towards the produce section.

Shen Yuan throws his hands up in the air, mildly irritated but not any more than Luo Binghe usually makes him, and follows after him.

“Couldn’t you at least try being obedient?” Shen Yuan whines as he catches up to Luo Binghe. “What if I said, ‘hey Binghe let’s go get the glue first,’ and you just said ‘sure, Yuan-ge, you know best, I’ll follow quietly and keep my hands to myself and earn a hundred good boy stars!’ What if, hm?”

“Does Yuan-ge have any allergies?” Luo Binghe asks with mock sweetness, not even glancing back at Shen Yuan as he starts to inspect the eggplant.

“You -! Did you even hear a word I just said, ah?!”

“Sure. A hundred ‘good boy’ stars, wasn’t it?” Luo Binghe cuts a glance back at Shen Yuan as he places a suitably plump eggplant in his basket, somewhere between mean and smug. “That should have been at least two.”

“For what? Taking off without me?”

“For extending thoughts to your health and calling you by that stupid name,” Luo Binghe quips back.

Shen Yuan scowls. “Alright, then. I’m allergic to eggplant.”

“Hm. Too bad,” Luo Binghe says, not putting the eggplant back and instead wandering off to inspect some of the fruit.

“Ah! See! You didn’t even mean it!” Shen Yuan follows after Luo Binghe, tugging irritably at his sleeve. “No good boy stars if you don’t mean it!”

Luo Binghe turns to snap his teeth at Shen Yuan. “This Lord will decide for himself if he’s good or not - I’ve already told you as much.”

Shen Yuan scowls, dropping his hand from Luo Binghe’s shirt and turning away.

“Well - fine! See if I get you the glue you need to fix those broken things, hmph!”

“...Are you really allergic to eggplant?” Luo Binghe grumbles after a moment of silence.

Shen Yuan deflates. “No,” he says, bitter. “I could be, though!”

Somehow, even without looking, Shen Yuan is sure Luo Binghe rolls his eyes at him. *Luo Binghe from Proud Immortal Demon Way would never do something as undignified as rolling his eyes when something was stupid or irritating - get the character right if you insist on it so much, ah!!*

Shen Yuan sullenly trails after Luo Binghe as he takes his time going through the produce section, with Luo Binghe nearly filling the whole basket with his choices. Shen Yuan attempts at one point to let his mind wander as Luo Binghe does as he pleases, but -

“Look - you can tell this spinach is overripe from the dark tips of some of the leaves,” Luo Binghe says, shoving a handful of leafy greens in Shen Yuan’s face.

"...Okay?"

"This Lord only figured Shen Yuan must have failed to select good spinach in the past, for how short he is now," Luo Binghe sniffs, clearly pleased to be insulting Shen Yuan in a sneaky way that Shen Yuan can't outright scold him for.

Shen Yuan splutters a bit as he tries to find a comeback, realizes he knows very little about produce that could be used in any sort of conversation at all, and settles for comforting himself by half-heartedly trying to put some of Luo Binghe's choices back on the shelves out of spite.

Their shopping trip continues like this for some time - Luo Binghe clearly having fun being a bit mean, and Shen Yuan tolerating it when the alternative might be Luo Binghe being a *lot* mean with *no* fun - until they finally are able to leave the produce section and pick up the handful of other things Shen Yuan had needed. A new spare toothbrush to replace the backup Luo Binghe has been using, an extra charging cable to account for how frequently Luo Binghe steals Shen Yuan's, and - finally - super glue.

Luo Binghe unceremoniously shoves the shopping basket at Shen Yuan when they get to the glue, stepping forward to scrutinize the selection carefully. Shen Yuan staggers a bit as he adjusts to the weight of the basket - fuck, if he'd known it was this heavy, he wouldn't have taken it! - and watches Luo Binghe curiously.

"Do you know which one is best?" Shen Yuan asks. Surely, being a cosplayer means you know this sort of thing, right?

"How would I?" Luo Binghe snaps back, picking up several products and beginning to read the descriptions.

"How'd you make your belts and stuff without glue?" Shen Yuan asks, curious. "The ones from the clothes you were wearing when I picked you up."

"You didn't *'pick me up,'"* Luo Binghe protests. "You groveled a bit for my company, and I graciously accepted your sponsorship."

Shen Yuan sighs. "Right, right. Anyway, how'd you make them?"

Luo Binghe shrugs. "This Lord wouldn't have bothered to make his own clothes. I presume they were made like any other belts."

Shen Yuan squints at Luo Binghe. He commissioned the cosplay, then…?

Hm. How… disappointingly unimpressive. Shen Yuan had thought that perhaps this stubborn man's one good side might be his creative passions, but it turns out he's all teeth and no gentle crafting after all.

Luo Binghe, blissfully unaware that he's losing favorability in real time, finally turns and places one of the glues he'd been inspecting in the shopping basket.

“This one dries in under ten seconds,” Luo Binghe states proudly, and Shen Yuan peers down at the glue in his basket curiously.

“Hm,” he says, recognizing the logo. “You’ll want to wear gloves when you use that. My sister got some of this for a school project some years ago and couldn’t get it off her fingers for weeks.”

“This Lord is better than any Shen could be at anything,” Luo Binghe says, completely confident, and Shen Yuan sighs. Whatever, whatever - not his problem if Luo Binghe gets some of this on his skin, then!

Shen Yuan shoves the shopping basket back into Luo Binghe’s arms in order to get his money’s worth of his muscles, and then starts leading them up to the cash registers.

…And then almost marches them right back to the other side of the store when he recognizes the woman at the only open register.

Unfortunately, turning back around only has Shen Yuan face planting into Luo Binghe’s chest - don’t follow behind so closely, ah! - and by that point, Shen Yuan has already made enough of a fool of himself that he may as well just get it over with.

“Don’t say anything to or around her,” Shen Yuan whispers to Luo Binghe as they approach. “I still have to use this store - *regularly.”*

“Is Shen Yuan implying this Lord is some sort of embarrassment?” Luo Binghe snaps back, clearly offended. Shen Yuan glances back at him, his stupid pointy teeth bared as if he were really a demon and not just a nerdy human, and says nothing.

The cashier smiles politely at them when they approach, and makes the usual small talk as she scans the items.

“Are you cooking for someone special tonight, sir?” She asks, as she scans through what is clearly far more vegetables than Shen Yuan usually brings to the checkout with him.

Behind Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe leans over his shoulder to watch the cashier carefully. “Me,” he says simply.

Shen Yuan shoots him an alarmed look. “Eh? You better mean ‘me, I’m the one cooking,’ and not ‘me, you’re cooking for me,’ Binghe, because I assure you that if I’m in charge of dinner it will *not* be that green.”

In front of them, the cashier laughs awkwardly as she finishes ringing them up. “I’m sure you’d be alright - that still leaves quite a few colors to work with.”

Shen Yuan flushes, embarrassed the second he’s reminded that there’s a third person there besides just him and Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe, still leaning over Shen Yuan’s shoulder, frowns.

“Don’t look like that,” he scolds, and stands up properly so that he can grab Shen Yuan by the collar and shake him briefly. “This Lord is *right here,* ignore her.”

Shen Yuan yelps, feet dangling off the ground uselessly as he tries to get Luo Binghe to drop him. “You -! At least let me pay before you start causing problems!”

Luo Binghe drops him, still scowling, and Shen Yuan rushes to take out his phone to pay for the groceries.

“I am *so* sorry about him,” Shen Yuan mumbles, face burning and completely mortified about it all. He isn’t sure if it makes it better or worse that the cashier’s face is also flushed pink.

“No - ah, no worries! Good luck!” She says awkwardly, giving them both a thumbs up before blushing even brighter.

Luo Binghe eyes her for a moment, then hums to himself, clearly satisfied with whatever he got out of the exchange. He grabs the bags of groceries and starts heading for the door, leaving Shen Yuan to scramble to catch up.

“What was that!” He hisses as they exit the supermarket. “I *just* told you I need to be able to come back here, but I’m going to need to order delivery for everything for the next several *months* until they forget me, ah!”

Luo Binghe sniffs. “This Lord was very well behaved for this date. It was Shen Yuan who was being troublesome.”

“You aren’t - wait, no that wasn’t -” Shen Yuan pauses, trying to figure out which point he wanted to address first.

Why are there always so many points to address, when it’s about Luo Binghe!

“That,” Shen Yuan starts, “was not a date. That was an errand.”

“We are dating,” Luo Binghe argues. “Shen Yuan said himself that it’s a date if we go out and one of us enjoys it.”

“That’s not quite - wait, you *enjoyed* going shopping?” *What is wrong with this man, to enjoy running errands?!*

“The produce was very impressive,” Luo Binghe allows. “Shen Yuan did well this time.”

And then Luo Binghe has the gall to pat Shen Yuan’s head like he’s praising a dog. You -! Only Shen Yuan gets to do that, Luo Binghe!!

Spitefully, Shen Yuan ducks out from under Luo Binghe’s hand only to jump up and drag his own hands over Luo Binghe’s hair. Ha! Take that - get *pet,* asshole!

…Luo Binghe does not duck away from Shen Yuan’s hands. Instead, he ever so slightly bends down a bit, so Shen Yuan has better access. He seems vaguely pleased, as if getting a reward he’d been waiting for.

“This Lord is glad Shen Yuan sees sense,” he says, unbearably smug. “I was definitely worth this many ‘good boy’ stars on this date. I even bothered to teach you how to pick out your

own produce, so you might survive when I leave to wed my Shizun."

Shen Yuan stares at him dumbly. He…

There's no way Shen Yuan has only given out a good boy star in conjunction with petting Luo Binghe's head, has he? It's certainly not *Shen Yuan's* fault this man thinks getting several headpats means also getting several good boy stars, right??

Awkwardly, Shen Yuan clears his throat, dropping his hand from Luo Binghe's head and pulling out a couple magnetic stars form his pocket.

"Uh, sure, this -" Shen Yuan pauses, thinking about what on earth he could reward Luo Binghe for back there. He already gave him a star for carrying the shopping basket!! "...Here's one for offering to cook dinner tonight, and one for making sure you choose a good glue for fixing my figures."

"And?" Luo Binghe asks, even as he quickly snatches up the stars to shove in his 'good boy' fanny pack.

"...And…?"

"I deserve at least one more for forgiving Shen Yuan for allowing his eyes to wander while on a date with me," Luo Binghe sniffs.

"Wander to *what?"* Shen Yuan cries, baffled.

"The cashier," Luo Binghe clarifies. "Don't look at women when I'm with you."

"What kind of Reddit-level toxic boyfriend shit is that?" Shen Yuan asks, half to himself. "In the first place, isn't this - I mean, we're both - neither of us is a girl! Why would a girl matter in this case!"

"Shen Yuan is still pretending he likes girls normally," Luo Binghe explains, as if he is being *very* patient with Shen Yuan. "So of course, when -"

"Oh look," Shen Yuan interrupts, relieved beyond belief to have found an excuse for Luo Binghe to stop talking. "We made it home!"

Thank you, past self, for choosing an apartment complex within walking distance of a supermarket!

Luo Binghe doesn't stop pestering Shen Yuan to give him his 'deserved' good boy stars as they head up the elevator and put away the groceries - or, more accurately, as Shen Yuan attempts to put them away and Luo Binghe rearranges them to his own liking - but he does finally give it up when all but the glue is put away. At that point, Luo Binghe snatches up the glue and settles back in at the kitchen table.

"Are you sure you don't want gloves?" Shen Yuan asks, picking up Luo Binghe's discarded fanny packs to put the contained star magnets on the board on the fridge.

Luo Binghe ignores Shen Yuan, opening the glue and sniffing at it cautiously. His nose scrunches up almost immediately at the stench of strong glue. Shen Yuan tries not to laugh too obviously.

“Well, suit yourself, then,” Shen Yuan snickers, sitting himself down across from Luo Binghe once more. “Want me to keep reading to you?”

“Will you read it properly, this time?” Luo Binghe asks dryly.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Shen Yuan says, pretending as if that is very true. He takes out his phone, ready to open back up his reading app, only to get distracted by the notification waiting on his home screen. “Oh, I hadn’t expected to hear back so soon.”

Luo Binghe glares up at him from over a half-repaired Miku figure. “Stop texting other people. How many times must this Lord remind you that you’re dating *me* right now?”

“God, you’re insufferable,” Shen Yuan mutters. “No, this is something for you, too, actually: I reached out to some of the actors who used to run those old acting youth camps.”

Luo Binghe stares at him blankly.

“To find your old teacher,” Shen Yuan clarifies, completely unnecessarily. Come on, Luo Binghe, you should know better than Shen Yuan that you met your precious ‘Shizun’ at one of these camps! “It looks like a couple of them are able to spare some time next week to meet up briefly.”

All of a sudden, Luo Binghe is on full alert. It’s been awhile since Shen Yuan last saw Luo Binghe with his cosplay red contacts in, but just for a moment, it looks very much like he has them back in again.

“Shizun…” Luo Binghe says, gaze distant. Then, he’s back in the present again, glaring at Shen Yuan with startingly intensity. “How is he? Is he married already? Does he still like fans?”

“Most actors like their fans at least a little bit,” Shen Yuan hedges. He had very purposefully *not* looked too far into the personal information of the candidates he felt most likely to match Luo Binghe’s timeline, so he doesn’t really know the answers to the other questions.

“Is he married?” Luo Binghe repeats again, and Shen Yuan sighs, exasperated.

“You’ll find out soon enough, I suppose,” he grumbles. “Also, watch your hand.”

Luo Binghe glances down to where he’d unconsciously been gripping the glue bottle quite tightly. Not much glue had actually spilled out of the container, but there’s still a small trail that drips across Luo Binghe’s skin.

“Ah…” Luo Binghe sets the bottle down, rubbing at the glue. “If he’s married, I’ll kill his husband this time.”

Shen Yuan sighs again, heavier this time as he gets up to grab some paper towels. “If he’s married, find someone else, please.”

“Absolutely not,” Luo Binghe snaps, snatching the paper towel out of Shen Yuan’s hand when he returns. “I’ll do as I please with what I deserve.”

He rubs viciously at the glue. Predictably, it does not come off. Shen Yuan watches his fruitless efforts and tries very hard not to think of some poor guy getting cucked by Luo Binghe’s weird teacher kink.

“...Should have worn gloves,” Shen Yuan observes mildly.

Luo Binghe scowls at him, discards the paper towels, and sets about trying to bite the glue off his skin directly.

“Hey - hey! Woah woah woah, Binghe, don’t - you’re not a *dog,* and where have your hands been, and -” Shen Yuan breaks off, remembering that Luo Binghe is a method actor of a period piece and a terminally online guy as evidenced by his taste in webnovels, and grows several times as alarmed. “Wait, wait, Binghe, when was the last time you washed your hands? How often do you wash your hands!?”

Luo Binghe is already up and out of his seat to avoid getting chased down and caught by Shen Yuan, though, and Shen Yuan curses as he has to stop to put the cap back on the glue before running after him. This stupid boy -!

…Ah, his poor Miku figure is never going to get fixed…

Chapter End Notes

bingge at the store: you have EVERYTHING here, you could've just bought yourself a boyfriend?!
sy: ya i did. ur it. i bought u. now behave pls before i try to return u for a more polite model ty

thank you as always for reading along!

edit: there’s MORE fanart now!! from NoodledYJ, the beginning scene with sy playfully sabotaging bingge’s attempts to fix the miku figure! it’s so good, an extremely fluffy bingge, go check it out!

edit 2: and more fanart again!! shitpostlemon has drawn bingge rocking his dual fanny packs at the store, and somehow he's actually pulling it off?? go look!!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan wakes up the next morning to a pair of red-tinted eyes inches from his face.

“Fuck!” He startles backwards, falling out of bed with all the grace of someone half-asleep and still twisted up in his own blankets. He yelps when he hits the ground, scrambling to disentangle himself from his blankets so he can prop himself up on his knees to peer up across the bed.

Luo Binghe, sitting politely on the other side of the bed, sniffs and turns his nose up at him.

“I didn’t wake you up,” he says, as if that’s the main problem here.

Shen Yuan scowls, lunging forward to try and swipe at Luo Binghe from across the bed. The sheets twisted around his legs just make him faceplant right into the bed, though, and Shen Yuan nearly gnashes his teeth when he hears Luo Binghe snort in clear amusement.

Pushing himself up and finally kicking the sheets free, Shen Yuan grabs for a pillow and lobs it at Luo Binghe’s head.

“There! Is a door!!” Shen Yuan points furiously at the door to his room. “I *locked* it before bed last night, just like I’ve been doing every night since the morning you barged in here and dragged me out of bed, ah!”

Luo Binghe catches the pillow with ease and glances towards the door with vague disinterest. Then, he glances back down at the pillow in his hands, and -

“No, wait, shit, give that back -”

“Is this me?” Luo Binghe asks, glancing back up at Shen Yuan. His mouth splits into a toothy grin; he looks wildly smug. “Locking me out at night, and then sleeping with a poor substitute?”

“Absolutely *not* - look, it isn’t even a body pillow, it’s just - I mean, it - it only -”

“Is it that Shen Yuan is too shy to ask properly? Have I overestimated the chastity and due process this world requires before taking you to bed after all?”

Fuming, Shen Yuan picks up another pillow - blessedly blank and normal and not covered in an artist’s loving rendition of Luo Binghe’s face - and pitches that at Luo Binghe too. “Five bad Binghe stars for this! Seven, actually!”

“Ah, but isn’t it just that I caught Shen Yuan’s pillow to prevent it from hitting the ground and becoming dirty? Perhaps I should be rewarded, actually -”

"Ten bad boy stars!!" Shen Yuan shrieks, feeling very red in the face. "Out, *out!"*

"Hm," Luo Binghe says, dropping both pillows onto the bed in front of him before reaching over to pick Shen Yuan up and pull him over it.

Shen Yuan squirms, *so* not up for being dragged out of his room again today, but mercifully Luo Binghe decides to drop Shen Yuan once he's been pulled in front of him.

"I made you breakfast again," Luo Binghe says, looking down at Shen Yuan expectantly.

"You woke me up again, is what you did," Shen Yuan grumbles, still trying to chase away his blush.

"I did not," Luo Binghe protests, sounding oddly affronted. "I made you breakfast, *and* I waited for you to wake up."

"You broke into my room, and stared at me while I was sleeping like a creep," Shen Yuan amends.

"I *waited,"* Luo Binghe corrects, still looking down at Shen Yuan expectantly. After a moment of Shen Yuan looking up at him, exasperated, Luo Binghe sighs and pats Shen Yuan's head.

…

"Really?" Shen Yuan asks, incredulous. "You -"

No, he can't even say it. The idea of asking Luo Binghe if he's asking for a *head pat* -

No way, not in a million years!

…Hesitantly, Shen Yuan reaches up to pat at Luo Binghe's head. Luo Binghe makes a small *hmph* noise, as if only barely satisfied.

"I deserve more than *that,"* Luo Binghe says, examining his claws in apparent disinterest. Unrelatedly, looking down at his nails like that puts his head in a better position for being pat.

"More headpats? For breaking into my room and watching me sleep??" Shen Yuan asks, a bit hysterical.

It doesn't matter if it's a fake, he still looks like and responds to the name 'Luo Binghe,' the emperor of the combined realms of PIDW - how could he act like a domesticated dog, ah?!

"More good boy stars," Luo Binghe corrects. "This Lord deserves due rewards for extending unnecessary and extra care to his sponsor, even if the only rewards Shen Yuan is capable of offering are your useless star magnets. Obviously."

"I don't need to pat you to give you a -"

Luo Binghe snaps his teeth at Shen Yuan, very nearly nipping at Shen Yuan's hand as he snatches his hand away from Luo Binghe's head to hold close to his chest. Shen Yuan very quickly shuts up. Head pats for every star, he gets it, he gets it! Luo Binghe is insane and potentially touch starved, duly noted!

Seemingly done coercing Shen Yuan into praising him, Luo Binghe herds him out of his room and to the dining table. Shen Yuan goes with a vague sense of dread; if this is to be considered Luo Binghe's 'progress' towards being a tolerable roommate, there's no way he'll be able to woo that old teacher of his, ah!

…Shen Yuan feels a bolt of fear as he realizes something. If Luo Binghe fails to make a good impression and inevitably gets a restraining order placed on him, will he expect to live with Shen Yuan forever??

He sits down heavily at the kitchen table, eyeing Luo Binghe with a sudden sense of urgency. Surely, there has to be something salvageable here, right?? He's pretty, and…

…And…

Ah, shit.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan hedges, "what exactly is your plan to make a good impression on your teacher?"

Luo Binghe stands up a bit straighter where he's standing in front of the fridge slapping several magnetic stars on the 'good boy Binghe' side of the board. Shen Yuan isn't even sure where he got those.

"I've learned from Shen Yuan's reactions, so I know how to woo someone of this world now." Luo Binghe finishes lining up his magnetic stars to be aligned perfectly and comes to sit across the table from Shen Yuan, looking quite self-satisfied. "The lack of physical dangers in this world makes acts of aggression unattractive and can put you off. I've yet to figure out if the way you guard your chastity is the average for this world, but until proven otherwise I'll assume this world doesn't allow for quick marriages to excuse -"

"Stop stop stop," Shen Yuyan interrupts, "I asked for your plan to make a *good* impression, not your plans to avoid a bad one!"

It's true that Luo Binghe is far more tolerable after learning those lessons - an irritating roommate is much better than one likely to start a fight or destroy something or bully himself into Shen Yuan's bed - but that doesn't mean it's good enough to marry!

Luo Binghe makes a dismissive motion with one hand, scoffing. "This Lord is not unaware of the effect he has on others. Shen Yuan can protest, but if I hadn't spooked you with habits from my world, you would have carried on with your first impression - that I'm good enough to pay for."

Shen Yuan rears back, scowling hard enough Luo Binghe will surely believe his flush is out of anger and not embarrassment. He doesn't appreciate being reminded of his initial mistake

of asking to rent Luo Binghe as a boyfriend, thank you!! He learned his lesson not to judge just by a book's very pretty cover and to actually give it a read before buying, next time!!

…Ahem, not that there will *be* a next time, of course -

"Forget our first meeting," Shen Yuan groans. "In any case, that only happened because the character you had chosen was good. Not everyone has the same tastes."

"Then, I can be the one to offer to rent Shizun as a boyfriend, if it comes to that."

"With what money, ah??"

"As soon as I've recovered my power and can summon Xin Mo, I can -"

"Ah, forget it, forget it!" Shen Yuan drags a hand over his face, despairing for Luo Binghe's future prospects. "It's best if you just think that such a method doesn't exist."

"Is sponsoring someone in exchange for their company not common practice in this world after all?"

"It's common! Very common!" Shen Yuan won't be examining any possibility of it *not* being common, thank you! "Ahem, more like, the people who could possibly be your old teacher aren't in need of any sort of extra income, and won't take you up on that offer. It's best to just win them over naturally."

Luo Binghe eyes him suspiciously, but graciously lets the topic be dropped.

"Regardless, there isn't any need to be worried," he says. "Shizun will see sense in this world. He will love me."

"Ah, aren't you jumping to 'love' a bit too fast…" Shen Yuan sighs. Luo Binghe… really does act just like someone who never got enough attention as a kid, sometimes. It must have been hard, growing up in such a way that you resort to - well, whatever all *this* is when you grow up.

"You've apparently been sleeping with a pillow adorned with my likeness since before you even met me, and you have the gall to speak to this Lord about the pace at which he moves?"

Shen Yuan very quickly shoves enough food in his mouth he can't reasonably be expected to talk.

…Ah, at least 'a good cook' can be added next to 'pretty,' when it comes to listing the few things this miserable cosplayer has going for him!

"Alright," Shen Yuan says, after he's swallowed (both that bite and at least several more, just for good measure). "We have just under a week to figure out how to market you for marriage, then."

"Unnecessary," Luo Binghe scoffs.

"Very necessary."

"And are you meant to have me believe that, in the case I am still not up to speed on what the men in this world like, *you* know better?" Luo Binghe sweeps a pointed look around the apartment. "You have no lovers outside of the one you've hired."

"Don't call yourself my lover, thank you *very* much," Shen Yuan scolds, politely ignoring the overly snobby way Luo Binghe has just pointed out that he gets no bitches. "And in any case, I *am* a man in this world, so of course I'd know what other men like."

Well, maybe not gay men, since Shen Yuan isn't - well, he doesn't have those sorts of tastes, of course, but - Shen Yuan is progressive! Love is love! That means it's all the same, right? So, of course, whatever advice he gives, it should apply no matter what, right?

"I *am* your lover," Luo Binghe protests, puffing up as if he's been personally offended. "What else is Shen Yuan sponsoring me for?"

"Charity," Shen Yuan deadpans. "Anyway, you don't have anyone else to ask."

"I've found the people on the online Internet to be very -"

"Did you complete the internet safety course I sent you?" Shen Yuan interrupts. Luo Binghe glances away, scowling. "Then it looks like you're stuck with me."

"I don't need *you* to teach me anything -"

"To begin with, you have two things going for you," Shen Yuan interrupts, blatantly ignoring Luo Binghe. "We'll need to get you some proper clothes so your looks aren't discounted, and you can bring some snacks or something to show that you know how to use a kitchen."

"Oh, so Shen Yuan *is* aware that he's conveniently been forgetting his promise to take this Lord to get properly tailored clothes, then?"

Shen Yuan averts his eyes. It's just really too painful to go out in public with this Luo Binghe to make unnecessary trips, the sweats and oversized shirts are working just fine, ah!

"Ahem," Shen Yuan says, and then immediately changes the topic. "Since you have two good qualities already, if we can just find a few more, at the very least we can make you good enough to be considered."

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at Shen Yuan, but doesn't say anything. Shen Yuan watches him for a moment before sighing. It's probably a bit harsh to tell a kid from a bad background that they barely have anything going for them, ah…

"The people who used to volunteer at those youth camps aren't the biggest stars, but they aren't so small they have no fans, either," Shen Yuan explains, trying to gentle the blow a bit. "Put another way, they're not unused to people of various backgrounds trying to make a good impression on them. And, not only are you trying to make a good impression, you're trying to make such a strong one that they might meet you again and someday consider marriage."

Truthfully, even that is putting it lightly - after all, how else could Shen Yuan convince several minor stars to agree to a lunch like this without getting money involved? Those actors will be going into this treating it like a very expensive fan meetup, paid for with both cash and the knowledge that they'll have done a favor to the Shen family. Even if Shen Yuan is not directly involved with the various business his family does, after all, he's still plenty capable of sweetly telling his brothers that so-and-so small actor had kindly taken up his request to indulge his request for a private fanmeet.

With that in mind, the actors that agreed to meet Shen Yuan and his "avid fan" friend will certainly be nice and friendly, but anyone with even an ounce of popularity knows better than to get mixed up romantically with a fan. If Luo Binghe were any less pretty, Shen Yuan wouldn't even consider him having a chance!

"...If Shen Yuan insists," Luo Binghe allows, and Shen Yuan catches him cast a sullen glance towards the fridge. Luo Binghe may have taken to ensuring he adds a couple 'good boy' stars each day, but there's still quite a few 'bad boy' ones piled up on the board, too…

Hesitantly, Shen Yuan reaches out to pat at the hand Luo Binghe has resting on the kitchen table. Luo Binghe's eyes snap back to him, expression sharp as he watches him, but he doesn't take his hand back.

"You have one more good quality than I originally mentioned," Shen Yuan amends. "Although your willingness to be trained is clearly only newly acquired."

Luo Binghe scowls, brushing off Shen Yuan's hand and pulling his own back into his lap. "This Lord cannot be *trained,"* he spits. "I'm not a *pet."*

Shen Yuan mercifully does not even look at the Reward Board on the fridge.

"Don't worry - so long as you listen when it's important," he says, thinking of the half repaired Miku figure sitting on the coffee table in the living room, "minor disobedience can be cute."

Luo Binghe raises one eyebrow.

"Not to me!" Shen Yuan hastily clarifies. "Don't get any ideas. This - well, it's just something many other men think."

Obviously - there's a whole market for bratty younger sibling type characters. Luo Binghe could probably fit that sort of archetype… if you didn't know he's the type to *actually* bring a knife on a date. Threats are only cute if they're harmless!!

"...Shen Yuan thinks it would be good if a man was trainable and obedient, but also that disobedience is cute?" Luo Binghe says this with clear judgment in his voice.

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to argue - after all, this is only general advice, not about his *own* tastes! - but then he remembers who he's talking to. This is a Luo Binghe roleplayer; considering the many women Luo Binghe married in PIDW, this man clearly isn't worth arguing with when it comes to taste!

…Actually, should Shen Yuan be worried about privately meeting with those small actors next week? Luo Binghe was only so obsessed with one of these actor's persona from some years ago, right? It won't be that the actors themselves are freaks, right?!

Deciding to quickly move on before he can think too hard about it, Shen Yuan says: "The first thing you need is to find something to talk about that has absolutely nothing to do with your normal hobbies."

"And what exactly does Shen Yuan think my normal hobbies are, that they'd be so unattractive to my Shizun?"

"No one wants to hear about Proud Immortal Demon Way," Shen Yuan says with all the confidence of someone who has been told that very thing by his Meimei countless times. "For someone as obsessed as you, it's probably safest to not even mention cultivation settings."

Shen Yuan would know, after all. Even just mentioning this or that interesting monster design he'd read about makes his siblings roll their eyes at him, ah!

"Proud Immortal…" Luo Binghe starts, then sighs, dismissing the topic. "Cultivation isn't a hobby to begin with."

…Shen Yuan stares at him. He read PIDW for something *other* than the cool cultivation setting? It couldn't possibly have been for the character Luo Binghe himself, considering the disrespect this cosplayer has put on his name by being so completely un-cool!

"If anything, it's a job," Luo Binghe concludes.

Ah. So it's that bad, then…

Shen Yuan sighs. To be such a nerd that PIDW becomes something of a job for you… Not even Shen Yuan is *that* far gone, and he's responsible for over half the PIDW wiki!

…Ahem. Maybe it's better to not question what counts as a 'job,' actually.

More to the point, Luo Binghe clearly isn't the type to have many hobbies outside of - well, outside of what Shen Yuan has already seen. That's fine though! Shen Yuan can work with that!!

"What sort of formal training do you have in - uh, whatever fighting thing you do?" Obviously, there has to be *something,* for someone as knife-happy as Luo Binghe has proven to be.

Luo Binghe snorts. "Everything this Lord knows, he had to teach himself."

Nevermind! Forget Shen Yuan even thought about it! Someone trained and with a history of competition could be cool, someone self taught just looks crazy! Shen Yuan could just imagine it now - some small actor at this lunch politely asking Luo Binghe what he does for fun, and Luo Binghe pulling out a knife and going "check out this sick flick trick I taught myself." Shen Yuan can't let that happen, ah!

“Okay, uh, new plan - you probably like video games? Are you any good?”

“Do you have any?” Luo Binghe asks curiously. “I’d learned of them in passing earlier, but it didn’t seem like you had any installed on the laptop you gave me.”

“The laptop you are *borrowing,”* Shen Yuan corrects. “And of course you wouldn’t have seen any, you’re on a guest profile. More importantly you… have you not played any before?”

“When would I have?” Luo Binghe snorts, and Shen Yuan blinks at him.

A nerd - and anyone who reads a novel like PIDW as religiously as Luo Binghe clearly has *is* a nerd - that claims to not have had the chance to play games? Luo Binghe, please reorganize your priorities! Shen Yuan had the opportunity to -

Ah. The opportunity… Shen Yuan winces. *Slick move, Shen Yuan, asking the down on his luck guy with a tragic background if he’s into gaming, a notoriously expensive hobby!* Perhaps it’s unusual to find someone who never had the opportunity to play *any* games, but if Luo Binghe’s family couldn’t afford to buy any…

Actually, aren’t formal lessons for anything expensive, too? Had it been insensitive to ask what formal training he’d had in fighting? Has Shen Yuan really been shoving his foot in his mouth with this entire conversation that badly?!

Shen Yuan hesitates as he tries to reframe this conversation about hobbies with the reminder that Luo Binghe came from an unfortunate background. In that light, isn’t being self taught in whatever fighting or knife thing he does just impressive, showing that Luo Binghe cared so much about his interests that he pushed through the hardships of not having much to still learn something new on his own?

…Even thinking about it like that, it really just makes Luo Binghe seem unnaturally obsessed with fighting, ah…

But then, maybe it was necessary? Hasn’t Shen Yuan read stories online about how less fortunate children always end up picked on and bullied? If Luo Binghe was backed into a corner, unfortunate enough he couldn’t play video games growing up and had to resort to selling his services as a cosplayer as an adult, bullied for it and without the resources to learn how to properly defend himself…

Luo Binghe, who has been sitting and quietly observing as Shen Yuan cycles through increasingly colorful expressions, remains blissfully unaware of the tragic excuses Shen Yuan is busy fabricating for him in his head.

“I want to play one of the ‘first person shooter’ games,” he says. Shen Yuan startles out of his thoughts to look at him suspiciously.

“Because of the guns?” He asks dryly.

“If Shen Yuan won’t let me have one, I will have to train in other ways to prepare for when I can procure one on my own,” Luo Binghe says, turning up his nose at Shen Yuan.

Despite himself, Shen Yuan can't help but be amused.

Making Luo Binghe's one non-violent, non-PIDW orientated hobby 'gaming' probably wouldn't do anything for his marketability for marriage. But… gaming isn't considered quite as nerdy as it used to be, and can even be considered quite popular in some circles. And there's still the better part of the week to prepare, anyway - tomorrow they could find Luo Binghe a hobby that's more pleasant to talk about.

So, even if it's just for today, it's probably alright to give Luo Binghe a chance to have some fun, right?

Luo Binghe, damn you for having a tragic background, ah, Shen Yuan thinks, *it really makes it too easy to give in to you sometimes!!*

"Well, alright," Shen Yuan sighs. "But only because it would be morally wrong to not let you play something after finding out you never have. Luo Binghe, you remember this: your Yuan-ge is really very good to you, hm?"

"Hm," Luo Binghe says, neither agreeing nor dismissing the sentiment.

"One week until meeting your old teacher, Binghe," Shen Yuan reminds him dryly.

"Very good to me," Luo Binghe amends, voice flat. Then he raises one eyebrow at Shen Yuan. "Did 'obediently' saying that make me more attractive to you, Shen Yuan?"

"Not if you're going to make it clear you're only doing it to please me," Shen Yuan sniffs.

"Perhaps Shen Yuan should realize his standards for what makes men attractive are stupid, then, and -"

Shen Yuan leans across the table to shove a generous bite of his breakfast in Luo Binghe's mouth.

"Why don't you eat with me?" Shen Yuan asks as he pulls back and slumps back into his chair, as if he hadn't just been trying to shut Luo Binghe up. "Is it so you can keep your mouth free to make silly comments, ah?"

Luo Binghe chews and swallows with a positively mutinous look on his face. "I eat while I cook," he grumbles. "Obviously, I wouldn't serve food I didn't know was good."

"Well, just taste test next time so you can eat with me, it's awkward eating a whole feast like this while you just watch."

"This Lord doesn't need to grace Shen Yuan with his attention, then," Luo Binghe huffs, getting up from the table to stalk away into the living room. "I have more important things to do, anyway."

"Ah, wait wait, where are you going?!" Shen Yuan stands as well, snatching up his plate to carry his breakfast into the living room after Luo Binghe. "Why do you sound so put off, ah? Wasn't I just inviting you to eat with me?"

“Shen Yuan was the one who had a complaint with this Lord sitting with him,” Luo Binghe says. He really does sound quite irritated - he hadn’t even swapped back out of talking in the third person with all his roleplay stuff, which Shen Yuan had noticed recently really only comes out when Luo Binghe was ready for a fight.

Still, he’s sat himself in front of the coffee table to sulk through reattaching another piece of the broken Miku figure, so he can’t be too upset. Likely, he was just irritated about how that breakfast went: expecting to be praised profusely for it, but then Shen Yuan just took it as an opportunity to start drilling Luo Binghe on becoming marriage material before chasing him off from the table.

Shen Yuan sighs, but pats absently at Luo Binghe’s head as he passes by to sink into the couch. He can finish eating here, then.

“Thank you for making breakfast, Binghe,” Shen Yuan says, trying not to sound too amused as Luo Binghe immediately straightens up a bit.

“And?” Luo Binghe says, feigning disinterest.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “And you don’t need any more praise than that,” he snorts. Shen Yuan had already acknowledged Luo Binghe’s cooking as one of his few good qualities, no need to let him get a big head about it!

“Shen Yuan wouldn’t know what was praiseworthy if it came up to him and bit him,” Luo Binghe growls, though there isn’t any real aggression in his expression.

“Ah, why is it always biting with you? Is it a fetish thing?” Luo Binghe glances up at him, smirking, and Shen Yuan nearly chokes on his food in his rush to say: “Don’t you *dare* answer that, ugh!”

Shen Yuan finishes breakfast like that, poking at Luo Binghe between bites to watch with idle amusement as Luo Binghe does his best to balance snipping back at him and maintaining absolute stillness to hold the Miku figuring together as the glue dries. When he’s done, he stands to go put his plate in the sink before returning to the living room to turn on the television.

“No one *starts* with a shooter,” Shen Yuan explains, grabbing his Switch before settling back onto the couch. “Mario Kart first. Here -”

Shen Yuan tosses Luo Binghe one of the Switch’s joycons. Luo Binghe, who had only just released the Miku figure, snatches the joycon out of the air and holds it up to his face to inspect it.

Shen Yuan pats the couch beside him, coaxing Luo Binghe to sit properly instead of on the floor by the coffee table. “Close up your super glue, and come sit. You’ll want to be comfy - I’m about to make you *very* comfortable with losing.”

“Ha!” Luo Binghe flashes a sharp grin at Shen Yuan, looking unbearably smug. “If it’s a competition, this Lord will win. Perhaps Shen Yuan will finally recognize talent.”

“Hm,” Shen Yuan says, trying to repress a grin of his own. “Wanna bet on it?”

“Shen Yuan doesn’t have anything useful to wager with -”

“I’ll buy you a NERF gun,” Shen Yuan interrupts. Luo Binghe’s mouth snaps shut, his expression suddenly eager. “If you win six out of ten, you can choose whichever NERF gun you’d like. If I win… hm. What time do you normally wake up?”

“Sunrise,” Luo Binghe says, as if that isn’t a completely fucking insane thing to say. Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“Alright, sicko. How about, if I win, we set up my old alarm clock in your room to go off an hour before sunrise for the next week, then?”

“What purpose will that serve?” Luo Binghe asks. “Is Shen Yuan implying that this Lord needs an extra hour to make a better breakfast?”

“What? No, you can just go back to sleep after it goes off.”.

“...Then?” Luo Binghe hedges. “What would you get out of that?”

“Payback,” Shen Yuan says grimly, lighting a candle in his heart for the mornings he’s been dragged out of bed by Luo Binghe.

Luo Binghe looks at him for a long moment. “You… have very odd ideas of revenge. This Lord will take pity - if someone wrongs you in the future, I will plan out the revenge on your behalf.”

“What, so you can get me arrested? No thanks,” Shen Yuan snorts. “Anyway, look here - hold the controller like this. Motion controls are off, so you’ll need to move with - no, stop, I’m getting arthritis just watching you hold it like that.”

“This Lord is holding it exactly as Shen Yuan demonstrated,” Luo Binghe huffs.

“Ah, you won’t even call me Yuan-ge when I’m teaching you something as fun as this? So cruel…” Shen Yuan mutters to himself, but waves Luo Binghe off when he tries to shove the controller in Shen Yuan’s face to show him. “I see, I see, no need to push it in my face - you’re holding it fine, your hands are just too big to use the Switch joycon. Hold on, we’ll switch to a different controller set.”

The next couple hours follow as such: Shen Yuan patiently teaches Luo Binghe how to use the Switch Pro controller, slowly guides him through the epic highs and lows of Mario Kart rules on a basic map, and even generously informs him about the concept of drifting for speed around corners.

“Competency is attractive,” Shen Yuan had instructed sternly. They might be playing games, but they were playing games with a *purpose,* after all! “Your old teacher will definitely like it best if you’re skilled in what you do, even your hobbies.”

Luo Binghe had nodded gravely, assured Shen Yuan that he would certainly be plenty good at video games, and steadfastly ignored the glee with which Shen Yuan set up a set of circuit races for the two of them.

Then, with all the relish of someone who grew up as the second youngest with years of experience in the art of being thrashed by his older siblings, Shen Yuan wipes the floor with Luo Binghe.

“Where are the other competitors,” Luo Binghe grits out, solidly in last place after driving straight off the map for the fourth time in the last minute. It is the third game in a row he has spent in last place. “Shen Yuan cannot possibly be controlling all of the other competitors, where have they connected online from?”

“Those,” Shen Yuan says smugly, deftly taking a shortcut he doesn’t even need from first place, “are bots. If you can’t even beat the bots, you don’t have a chance in hell of beating me.”

“Robots,” Luo Binghe snarls, glaring at the television as if he could put holes in it. “Your technology is *evil.”*

Shen Yuan barks out a laugh and completes his final lap, the celebratory animations playing mockingly on his half of the screen. Luo Binghe scowls, silently fuming as he finishes his own laps.

“Shen Yuan’s joyous victory is not helping this Lord become more attractively competent at Mario’s Kart game,” Luo Binghe grumbles when he crosses the finish line.

Shen Yuan looks the other way. “Ehhh… I’m sure you’ll find that hidden talent inside you soon. Maybe after your sixth defeat.”

“The sixth - just so Shen Yuan can win our bet?” Luo Binghe narrows his eyes at him. “Are you hiding information from me?”

“No - you’re just a noob,” Shen Yuan snorts. Luo Binghe only glares harder.

…Ah, he does feel a bit bad if he bullies Luo Binghe too much for normal learning curves, though. Tragic background, remember the tragic background!!

“Pay more attention to the track,” he begrudgingly advises. Tragic backstory or not, he still wants to win their bet! “You keep falling off because you’re taking corners too fast when you don’t know the right point to start drifting, or because you’re trying to purposefully knock into the other racers - just focus on making all the turns slowly and carefully, first.”

Luo Binghe hums, and Shen Yuan starts the next race. Except, once the match starts…

Shen Yuan cuts a glance away from the screen - his own character fighting for a top spot, Luo Binghe’s sitting still at start - to Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe is holding the controller loosely in his hands, eyes focused on the television. Specifically, he’s focused on the top half of the screen, where Shen Yuan’s character has just picked up an item.

"...You *really* won't win if you don't try," Shen Yuan says, turning his attention back fully to the screen.

"I'll win," Luo Binghe says vaguely. Shen Yuan sighs and tries not to let Luo Binghe's hyper focus on him spoil his focus.

When Shen Yuan wins again - his fourth in a row, now, he's getting close to that sweet revenge! - Luo Binghe finally picks his controller back up properly and nods to himself. He's wearing an expression of grim determination, and Shen Yuan frowns.

As the timer for the race counts down, Shen Yuan reaches out with one hand - the other, obviously, had already hit his start button at the perfect time for a starting speed boost - and pokes at Luo Binghe's face.

"It's a game, Binghe, not a war field," he says dryly, pulling his hand back to himself just in time to both avoid Luo Binghe's warning bite in his direction and to get both hands on his controller for the race to start.

"Foul play," Luo Binghe retorts. "Distracting me as the race is starting, Shen Yuan must really be worried to resort to dirty tricks."

"It's a *game,"* Shen Yuan repeats, sticking out his tongue vaguely in Luo Binghe's direction as he drifts around a corner of the track. "Your Yuan-ge is having *fun,* you should consider trying it."

"This Lord is having plenty of fun," Luo Binghe growls. Shen Yuan snickers to himself.

Then, on the lower half of the screen, Luo Binghe's character carefully follows the exact drift path Shen Yuan had taken around that same corner of the track just a moment ago, although he leaves the drift a bit late and loses speed for it. Beside him, Luo Binghe smiles sharply.

"Oh?" Shen Yuan grins. "You know, my Meimei tried to beat me by copying me just like that, when I was teaching her how to play."

"Shen Yuan's definition of 'teaching' how to play this game certainly involves leaving this Lord behind quite often."

"Don't be ungrateful," Shen Yuan sniffs. "I'm teaching you all the important things."

"Such as?"

"Such as 'having fun is the point,' idiot." On screen, Shen Yuan's character stunt jumps out of a drift and launches his character through a waterfall to make a shortcut.

"...Anything else?"

Shen Yuan sighs. "Sure, how about - 'wait until you understand the game a bit better before trying to copy your Yuan-ge,' hm?"

Saying so, Shen Yuan watches with mild amusement as Luo Binghe jumps out of his drift, heading straight for the waterfall that Shen Yuan had driven through some moments ago… and ends up just driving himself off of the map.

"..."

"You didn't have enough coins," Shen Yuan helpfully supplies as Luo Binghe's character is dragged back up onto the map. "Can't make that jump unless you're at max speed."

Beside him, Luo Binghe steadfastly ignores him.

(He does, however, seem to focus a bit harder on picking up coins on the track instead of blindly following the path Shen Yuan takes. Shen Yuan graciously does not point it out.)

Luo Binghe does improve somewhat by continuing to pay close attention to exactly how Shen Yuan is playing the game, of course - he even finishes the last two maps in the top ten, instead of in dead last! But, in the end, learning how to play to win in under six runs simply isn't realistic.

"Oh, too *bad,"* Shen Yuan says as the last match comes to a close, absolutely gleeful. "Looks like you have lots of not-sleeping and very little of shooting guns in your future."

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at Shen Yuan. "If this Lord knew the race track better -!"

"I've *very* generously been keeping us playing on the same map each round, Binghe," Shen Yuan cuts him off, still grinning.

"...Still -!" Luo Binghe grits his teeth, clearly casting about for something else to blame. Shen Yuan waits patiently for him to find something to say. Eventually, Luo Binghe just turns away from him, staring at the television sullenly. "Shen Yuan is truly as rotten as everyone else, boasting a win against someone who doesn't know better."

Shen Yuan can't help but laugh a bit. Luo Binghe… really does remind him of a sulking child, sometimes.

When Luo Binghe's expression turns even darker at Shen Yuan's laughter, Shen Yuan does his best to hide his smile.

"Alright, alright, I was wrong," he says, completely unrepentant. He reaches out to poke at Luo Binghe's cheek again, and Luo Binghe shows him his sharp teeth in warning but doesn't chase him off this time. "I'm sure you'll be able to beat me… some ten years from now."

Luo Binghe finally turns to snap at Shen Yuan's fingers.

"What?" Shen Yuan laughs as he pulls back. "Does Binghe think after all the trouble he's given me, I won't give him a bit of harmless trouble back?"

"As if Shen Yuan could ever give this Lord any trouble!"

…Shen Yuan presses the button on his controller to make his character beep their horn on screen. Repeatedly. Luo Binghe lasts for a solid five beeps before he tackles Shen Yuan for the controller.

“You -!” Luo Binghe smushes Shen Yuan’s face sideways into the couch with one hand, the other reaching for the controller.

“Me!” Shen Yuan agrees with relish, holding his controller as far away as possible with one hand and blindly continuing to hit the button making his character honk their horn. His words come out a bit muffled with his face squished as it is. “The winner!”

“Unjust! Cheater!” Luo Binghe cries back, using his absolutely unfair reach to snatch the controller from Shen Yuan’s hands. “Let me use your controller this time, it must work better!”

“Oh? Binghe wants to play again?” Shen Yuan says as he sits up, Luo Binghe having backed off after taking the controller. “So you *were* having fun!”

“Absolutely not,” Luo Binghe refutes, passing Shen Yuan the controller he’d been using for the last six rounds. “It was you who said my Shizun will be attracted to me if I’m competent at Mario’s Kart game.”

Shen Yuan snickers. “Right, right, of course.”

“I *will* be attractive to Shizun,” Luo Binghe grumbles, mashing at the controller buttons as he tries to figure out which one to use in order to ready them both up for another race.

“Well, if you keep calling it ‘Mario’s Kart game’ like that,” Shen Yuan says, reaching over to press the right buttons for Luo Binghe, “I’m sure your teacher will absolutely think you know everything about it.”

Luo Binghe frowns at the screen. “...Mario’s Karts?”

“There do appear to be multiple go-carts on the screen, huh,” Shen Yuan agrees wisely. Deciding to be more merciful now that their bet has been won, he adds: “Press ‘start’ now.”

Luo Binghe obediently does so. On screen, his character gets the starting bonus from having revved his engine at the right time as the race began, and Luo Binghe’s expression goes a bit smug.

Snickering to himself, Shen Yuan turns his attention back to the screen to focus on his own play.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “If you earnestly keep trying like this and still end up losing, it’s a bit pitiful.”

“Shen Yuan thinks looking pitiful isn’t something to worry about? When the whole point is to look competent?” Luo Binghe asks, disgruntled.

“Looking pitiful can be attractive too,” Shen Yuan states confidently.

“...Shen Yuan’s tastes are really too different.”

“Not - not attractive to me *specifically,”* Shen Yuan hastily corrects. “This - it’s like that for all men! I’m only trying to help you, ah!”

Luo Binghe snorts. “My Shizun despised pitiful things.” Then, Luo Binghe pauses, seeming to consider something. “Well, perhaps he liked some of them. Regardless, it’s better to be seen as competent than as pitiful.”

“I don’t know,” Shen Yuan hums. “For you…”

On the bottom half of the screen, Luo Binghe exits a drift too early and drives straight off the map.

“...For you, it might be better to be pitiful,” Shen Yuan laughs. Beside him, Luo Binghe growls and abandons his controller to try tackling Shen Yuan again.

(Shen Yuan wins all their games that day.)

Chapter End Notes

bingge, playing games with a >:((expression:
sy: aw, he's having fun!

once more i'm a bit late with this chapter, but at least not as badly, orz. ty to those of you in the comments + on tumblr who have reassured me to take my time tho :')
also, chapter count has been updated! i underestimated the amount of time needed to show bingge slowly moving from dangerous wolf to rabid chihuahua, lmfao. potential shizun meet-up next chapter!

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> The long awaited meeting with the potential Shizun candidates comes around. It goes about as well as you'd expect.

Chapter Notes

> clearly, keeping to a schedule when i'm writing as i'm posting is a useless endeavor for me, but at least this chapter is 2x the length of a normal one, to at least partially make up for the fact that it is 2x as late :'D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan does *try* to introduce Luo Binghe to more hobbies. He's well aware that Luo Binghe won't be winning the heart of any well cultured young actor if the only non-xianxia, non-violent topic Luo Binghe can hold a conversation about is how cool it is to laze around and play games!

Unfortunately, they make it through only a handful of the hobbies Shen Yuan can think up and classify as 'probably normal and cool to talk about' before it becomes clear that the matter is hopeless.

At first, Shen Yuan thinks that reading is the obvious choice. Luo Binghe clearly already likes it - even if his genre preferences are so unfortunate that he and Shen Yuan ended up with Proud Immortal Demon Way as a shared interest - so they just have to train Luo Binghe up on more respectable choices. Classic literature so he can come off as well educated, or even just some recent popular novels that his former mentor may have read too.

But because the universe likes making things difficult for Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe nearly reverts back to his earlier, far more feral self when Shen Yuan deposits a book of classic poetry in front of him.

"Are you mocking this Lord?" Luo Binghe snarls. "Does Shen Yuan think he's *cute,* trying to teach this Lord the four arts in preparation for meeting my Shizun?"

"Wha - listen, poetry isn't *that* bad," Shen Yuan says, picking up the book and flipping idly through it. "Look, you'll like this one, it's got all kinds of stuff about death and war in here."

But Luo Binghe only bares his teeth at him, smacks the book out of his hands, and assures him *quite* thoroughly that if Shen Yuan tries to point Du Fu's works at him again he'll set the book on fire.

So! No classic literature or poetry! Understood! For good measure, Shen Yuan would abandon all thought of trying to get Luo Binghe to appear classy through any of the four arts!! Which - fine, maybe that would be for the best anyway; it isn't like Luo Binghe is the sort to be able to uphold any sort of attitude that could be construed as 'elegant' or 'classy' to begin with!

So Shen Yuan tries the opposite direction. If Luo Binghe won't be able to lure them in with promises of what a respectable and cultured piece of arm candy he could be, he'll have to sell himself as a fascinating and unique young man!

Maybe they could lean into the bad boy look and get Luo Binghe into motorcycles?

"Is that supposed to be impressive?" Luo Binghe drawls, watching with only half his attention as Shen Yuan tries to show him videos of motorcycles zipping around a track. "They can't even leave the ground."

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. "Oh, of course you'd be the kind of guy who thinks something like a motorcycle is only cool if you're doing stunts with it. *Yes,* it's supposed to be cool - these things are like, crazy expensive and dangerous even when you're just driving them normally!"

"So you *can* get them to fly?" Luo Binghe asks curiously. "I thought there weren't cultivators in this world."

Shen Yuan stares at Luo Binghe blankly for a moment before lightly cuffing him over the head. "You! Take this seriously! I'm trying to find you an *angle* here, what have I told you about how hopeless things will be if you go to your old teacher and start talking as if cultivation is a real thing, ah??"

"You were the one who said they could fly," Luo Binghe grumbles, batting Shen Yuan's hand away. "And I don't need an angle. I'm Luo Binghe."

"I said you can do *stunts,"* Shen Yuan corrects, sniffing haughtily as he pulls up a video and steadfastly ignores Luo Binghe's other statement. "Going up ramps and doing jumps, stuff like that."

Luo Binghe watches the video for a moment, realizes there is no actual flight involved, and loses interest immediately.

"Hmph. That's hardly anything to be impressed by."

"What, like you could do better?" Shen Yuan snorts. Luo Binghe opens his mouth to respond, but before he can Shen Yuan adds, "Right now, in this world, without any of your supposedly lost powers."

Luo Binghe shuts his mouth. His expression looks as if he's tasted something particularly sour.

"That's what I thought," Shen Yuan says, feeling a bit smug. "Anyway, this kind of thing can be attractive to some people. *'Oh, look, he's the hot and dangerous type,'* y'know."

Luo Binghe takes an immediate interest once more.

"Oh, I'm *very* familiar with the sentiment," he practically purrs, leaning into Shen Yuan's space. Shen Yuan subtly presses himself a bit closer to the armrest of the couch beside him - too close, too close, someone please teach this man personal space, ah!! "Is that something Shen Yuan -"

"Absolutely not!" Shen Yuan cries, shoving his phone in Luo Binghe's face just to put something between them. *Look at the motorcycle videos, not me!* "Why the hell would I be into something like that?"

Luo Binghe grins sharply, leaning back out of Shen Yuan's space and looking smug. "What is Yuan-ge possibly talking about, hm? I was only going to ask if this is something Shen Yuan thinks my Shizun would be into, of course."

…Shen Yuan turns off his phone and shoves it back into his pocket. "Of course," he says, teeth gritted.

"Though, if Shen Yuan himself is interested…" Luo Binghe all but sing-songs, and Shen Yuan stands from the couch and turns away from Luo Binghe as quickly as he possibly can.

"I'm not helping you practice gay sex for your childhood crush," he says, trying to keep that statement as bland and emotionless as possible. He feels no embarrassment, no shame, he is a rock that Luo Binghe's shamelessness washes over with no effect…

Luo Binghe sighs, once more losing interest as his toy (a flustered Shen Yuan) escapes his clutches.

"Shen Yuan has made that *quite* clear," he sniffs. "Really, you're too prudish - if Shen Yuan only had a bit of fun, he wouldn't need to surround himself with statues of fake women to compensate."

Saying so, Luo Binghe glances pointedly at Shen Yuan's shelf of Miku figures - now home to one of the figures Luo Binghe had finished fixing, standing just slightly misshapenly next to the others. Shen Yuan squawks in utter indignation.

"Hatsune Miku is a *cultural icon!"* He cries. "I would *never* treat her like - like - I wouldn't - well! I'm not like some basement dwelling idiot who -!"

"You don't collect them to get off to?" Luo Binghe asks. "Hm. Well, good. At least this means I'm not less seductive than a *toy girl,* just yet."

Shen Yuan splutters, spares a moment to worry that his face is going to get stuck this red and flushed permanently, and then resolutely starts stalking out of the living room to go sulk in

his bedroom.

“I didn’t want to buy you a cool motorcycle *anyway!”* He cries over his shoulder, and pretends like he can’t hear Luo Binghe laughing as he retreats.

So! No motorcycles either! Forget the whole ‘bad boy’ approach altogether, actually - Luo Binghe truly doesn’t need any sort of encouragement in that direction!!

But… if Luo Binghe refuses the classy and educated look, and the bad boy look is also a no-go, what else *is* there?

…Shen Yuan feels the smallest of doubts that perhaps he might not actually know everything there is to know about what’s attractive to gay men. He… could do research?? How the hell would he even search for that, though? ‘Hobbies that are attractive to gay men’ is really not something he wants in his search history, ah!

Forget it, forget it - Shen Yuan will just think up something else generically attractive! He’ll find Luo Binghe a hobby he can proudly tell his old mentor about, just wait!!

Halfway through the week of failed hobby attempts, Luo Binghe cracks.

“Shen Yuan,” Luo Binghe says solemnly one morning. “Yuan-ge,” he corrects, dead serious.

Shen Yuan, who had been about to start eating breakfast - and ah, he’s really getting used to eating this well each day! - pauses. He can’t help but be suspicious whenever Luo Binghe calls him like that, it only ever means trouble!

“What did you do this time, hm?”

Luo Binghe bristles. “Shen Yuan is always so quick to assume this Lord’s guilt!”

Shen Yuan stares at him. He is far, far too exhausted from days of failed hobby-finding to even bother arguing this point. Luo Binghe deflates, looking away.

“I,” he says, speaking through gritted teeth, “apologize for waking you up in the past. Yuan-ge.”

Shen Yuan’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh, you *really* must have done something bad! Out with it then, let’s hear it.”

Luo Binghe silently places the shattered remains of Shen Yuan’s old alarm clock on top of the table between them. Shen Yuan, who has stirred irritably each morning when he distantly hears this damned thing go off from Luo Binghe’s room, almost wishes he could have been there to watch Luo Binghe destroy this thing in real time.

“Ah,” Shen Yuan says knowingly, trying to contain his glee at the proof of his successful revenge plan. “So even Binghe can understand the pain of being startled awake too early, hm?”

“Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe says again, this time with just a slight edge of pleading in his voice.

“Three ‘Yuan-ge’s in a row!” Shen Yuan laughs. “Truly, the situation must be dire.”

“I do not want to have to super glue this cursed thing back together like your Miku toys,” Luo Binghe continues, and Shen Yuan swears he can see real despair in his eyes at the thought of it. “I won’t wake you up again, so…”

“So?” Shen Yuan asks, goading him on. He wants to hear the whole thing, please!!

“So,” Luo Binghe says through gritted teeth, “...please.”

Shen Yuan snorts. That was really the most painful ‘please’ he’s ever heard.

“I don’t know…” Shen Yuan trails off. It takes everything he has not to let his grin show. Truly, this revenge has been everything he asked for!

“Please,” Luo Binghe says again, “do not make me put this miserable creation back together again.”

Finally, Shen Yuan lets himself laugh. “Alright, alright, you don’t have to - we’ll take this as a lesson learned.”

Luo Binghe’s visible relief just makes Shen Yuan laugh harder.

Shen Yuan rallies around the sense of accomplishment of having wrung an apology out of Luo Binghe and jumps back into hobby-finding with gusto.

“Alright, I got it - you can be into beauty.” Shen Yuan says, shoving at Luo Binghe a bit to make room for him to sit next to him on the couch. “Here, give me the laptop, we’ll get you some products.”

“Shen Yuan has already admitted that I need no help when it comes to my looks,” Luo Binghe protests, but he lets Shen Yuan pull the laptop away from him and onto his own lap without too much protest.

“Right, exactly - you won’t have to actually get good at makeup for this to work. You can just learn like, I don’t know, vocabulary? And your natural looks will sell the bit! The important thing is that your old teacher is an actor: he’ll *have* to be into beauty at least a little bit, so it can act as a common point of interest!”

“This Lord has no need to pretend,” Luo Binghe protests, sounding a bit offended. “I’m already proficient at applying charcoal and rouge.”

Shen Yuan pauses his search for ‘best makeup products,’ to look at Luo Binghe. He squints at him, then reaches out to rub at the corner of Luo Binghe’s eye.

“You -!” Luo Binghe jerks away from Shen Yuan’s hand, but Shen Yuan only dispassionately stares at his fingertips. There is no trace of makeup on them.

Shen Yuan nods to himself. As he thought - Luo Binghe just naturally looks like that.

“Why would I be wearing any right now?” Luo Binghe grumbles, delicately poking at his eye as if Shen Yuan could have messed up his eyelashes. “Shen Yuan hadn’t made it clear his preferences were for that sort of look, before.”

“I have no such preference,” Shen Yuan sniffs, forcefully shutting out the thought of how Luo Binghe might look with a bit of a cat eye, or with his lips stained red. “Anyway, the context here is important - do you know about makeup because you could have a conversation about beauty habits with some small idols, or because you’re a cosplay nerd?”

“Shen Yuan,” Luo Binghe sighs, “I don’t know what cosplay *is.”*

Shen Yuan snorts. “Good answer. Keep that up for our meeting with the actors.”

“No, I mean - give me my laptop back, I’ll look it up.”

Shen Yuan jerks the laptop up off his lap to hold it to the side and out of Luo Binghe’s reach. “Oh no you don’t, stay focused here.”

“Shen Yuan has used that word before, though. This Lord dislikes not understanding.” Luo Binghe grumbles. “What does it even matter how one becomes practiced with makeup?”

“It matters,” Shen Yuan says, “because if you get rejected by your childhood crush, *I’m* going to be the one who has to deal with you sulking.”

“He won’t reject me,” Luo Binghe snaps. Then he pauses, and adds sullenly: “Shen Yuan likes pitiful men anyway, why do you act like it would be such a burden to see me sulk?”

Shen Yuan levels a flat look at Luo Binghe. “Because knowing you, your definition of ‘sulking’ is less pitiful and more violent. Also, I’m not into -”

“You definitely are.”

“I am *not* -”

“Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe simpers, sticking out his bottom lip just slightly and leaning into Shen Yuan’s space in such a way that he has to look up through his lashes to meet Shen Yuan’s eyes. His totally not makeup enhanced lashes, that despite being natural are long and dark and - “Is this pitiful Binghe really not to Yuan-ge’s tastes?”

“Ah? Eh, wait, uh, that is -” Shen Yuan’s voice cracks, and he immediately snaps his mouth shut as if that could hide the embarrassing sound.

Luo Binghe’s eyes grow wider. His pout grows more devastating. Shen Yuan feels things he *really* wishes he didn’t.

And then Luo Binghe leans back, once more smug and unconcerned and not at *all* pitiful, and says: “See? That’s *definitely* Shen Yuan’s own tastes.”

…Shen Yuan turns back to the laptop in his lap. He hadn’t bothered to swap from Luo Binghe’s profile on it before he started searching for popular beauty products and trends, so he doesn’t have to pause before directly opening up the settings for it.

“Shen Yuan would probably *love* to see me sulk,” Luo Binghe continues smugly beside him. “I’m sure you’d like it *much* more than your Miku figures or the videos of motorcycles. In fact - wait, what are you doing?”

“Changing your password,” Shen Yuan replies, deadpan. He shifts so Luo Binghe can’t see the keyboard, smashes a long string of random keys, confirms the change, and directly signs out of the account.

“...What did you change it to,” Luo Binghe grits out, looking a bit like a kid who’s had his favorite toy suddenly taken from him.

“No fucking idea,” Shen Yuan says brightly. “Have fun figuring it out, though.”

Shen Yuan hands the laptop back to Luo Binghe, his smile sharp in a way he’d hate to think is something he’s picked up from Luo Binghe himself, and turns to leave the room.

Beauty habits as a hobby? For *this* asshole? Ha! No matter how pretty the face, if the inside is wicked, it isn’t beautiful after all!! *Peh!*

In the final days leading up to the meeting with the actors, Shen Yuan gives up. Who needs hobbies anyway? Isn’t it a thing that people will like you more if you just let them talk about themselves? Luo Binghe can just keep quiet about himself then, ah! His old teacher doesn’t have to hear a word about what Luo Binghe does in his free time!!

Luo Binghe, who Shen Yuan has recently allowed to graduate from Mario Kart to a simple shooter game, snorts at this declaration. “I’m looking for a husband, not someone to one-sidedly pledge my loyalty to.”

“Oh, of course,” Shen Yuan says. His words come out a bit muffled from the way he’s buried his face in his hands in despair. “And you’ll be able to magically win a husband in a single date by talking about all the many, *many* cool facts about yourself.”

“Shen Yuan’s worries are unfounded,” Luo Binghe says, still not looking away from the television screen. He’s picking this game up a bit more quickly than he had Mario Kart, but he’s still clearly having some trouble controlling both his camera and movement direction at once. “It’s as I said - I’m looking for a *husband.”*

“Trust me, I know,” Shen Yuan sighs. “That is literally the cause for all this concern.”

“A husband like -” Luo Binghe hesitates, dies in the game, and tosses aside the controller with a huff of frustration. “A husband,” he repeats.

"...And? I heard you the first time, you know."

"He will *love* me," Luo Binghe stresses. "That's why I'll marry him. So Shen Yuan's worries aren't needed - I don't need to pretend to have any of the foolish interests you think would make me attractive to him, because he'll love me regardless."

Shen Yuan finally raises his head from his hands, looking up to meet Luo Binghe's eyes. His expression is startlingly intense, the way it always is when he starts talking about that childhood crush of his.

Shen Yuan feels his expression soften somewhat. "He isn't likely to share any of your real interests," he says, voice quiet. "I'm not - it's not like I've been giving all this advice randomly. I've had plenty of blind dates with girls from this industry; things like this -" Shen Yuan gestures at the television, currently displaying Luo Binghe's losing statistics, "- this isn't the sort of thing they like."

"Why not?" Luo Binghe asks. "This technology is fascinating. A single machine, yet it could be used for anything from a training simulation for future battles to a date the way Shen Yuan plays it with me."

"That's not a date," Shen Yuan laughs a bit hopelessly. "We don't even leave the house to play games, how could that possibly be a date?"

"It's an activity done together with the intention of enjoyment," Luo Binghe says.

"Somehow, I feel like that definition has warped to become more and more generous," Shen Yuan mutters. "Anyway, it doesn't matter - like I said, most people in this industry won't be interested if all you can talk about is video games or cultivation stories or whatever else."

"Shen Yuan likes talking about those things," Luo Binghe points out.

"And Binghe is always very quick to remind me that I don't have any real, non-paid for girlfriends for him to compete with." Shen Yuan sighs, grabbing Luo Binghe's discarded controller to pick up where Luo Binghe had left off. "Believe me or don't, but I really have been trying to help you in my efforts to find you a more generically popular interest or hobby or whatever."

There's a reason why his siblings gave up on trying to set him up with a nice girl from one of the Shen family's business circles, after all - because Shen Yuan himself hadn't ever listened to their pestering advice about how to market himself for marriage, or at the very least, how to come across as a good addition to a potential girlfriend's social media feeds. The entertainment circle has always been that way, too, not just when Shen Yuan had been testing out dating within it - everything is always a popularity contest, simply because that's their *job*.

And that's fine for Shen Yuan! He is perfectly happy to extract himself from that circle almost entirely, minus the money he leeches off his parents. A NEET doesn't have to worry about things like whether the language he uses in the scathing reviews of webnovels he posts would ever dirty the waters of his potential employment, after all.

But for Luo Binghe, who hasn't wavered once in his resolution that his old acting mentor will be who he pursues… A mentor who is undoubtedly a part of the industry, who is just popular enough to have some amount of fans watching their choices but not popular enough to get away with doing whatever they want…

Well. Shen Yuan really has been trying to help Luo Binghe, here.

Luo Binghe watches Shen Yuan play for several quiet moments. Shen Yuan almost thinks he's let the topic drop in favor of watching and learning from how Shen Yuan mows down enemies, but eventually Luo Binghe seems to find what he wants to say.

"My Shizun -" Luo Binghe breaks off, then starts again: "The person I'm looking for doesn't care about that sort of thing. Even if he meets someone more powerful and popular and - even if he meets someone better, it wouldn't matter to him. He'd still choose to stay with the pitiful man he married."

Shen Yuan laughs humorlessly. "I never thought I'd hear the day when I got to hear you call *yourself* pitiful."

"I'm not," Luo Binghe snaps. "I'm only saying… The person I'm looking for, he wouldn't care about your rules for what's interesting or likable or not. He'll just like me, so… Don't worry so much."

Shen Yuan looks up from the game to turn and squint at Luo Binghe. "You… are you trying to comfort me?"

Luo Binghe bristles. "Of course not, this Lord is only trying to ensure you don't bring the stench of nervousness to my meeting with my Shizun, who cares if you're worried!"

"Oh certainly, my Lord, I'll be sure to only bring the pleasant smell of fresh flowers and romance to the brunch dates I carefully arrange for you," Shen Yuan snorts.

"As expected from any decent sponsor of this Lord," Luo Binghe agrees, but his too-sharp teeth are poking out in just the slightest grin, so Shen Yuan knows he's in on the joke. "Also, you died."

"Eh? Oh -!" Shen Yuan hurriedly whips back around to focus on the game, but it's too late - his character had, indeed, died. Beside him, Luo Binghe snickers, and Shen Yuan has to dodge out of the way to keep him from stealing the controller back.

It's fun. Shen Yuan hopes this old teacher they'll be meeting soon really is as into all of Luo Binghe's interests as Luo Binghe thinks he'll be - having this sort of careless fun on a regular basis has done *wonders* for Luo Binghe's attitude.

Before they know it, the day of the Potential Shizun Meeting arrives. Shen Yuan doesn't think Luo Binghe slept a wink the night beforehand, based on the sheer number of various

pastries and baked goods and snacks spread across the kitchen counters and shoved in the fridge when Shen Yuan trudges out of his room that morning.

"...You know I recommended that you make one, small thing to take as an offering of your cooking skills, right? Not an entire feast?"

"This Lord just felt like wasting your money on ingredients," Luo Binghe huffs, snapping his teeth at Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes, snatches a pastry from the nearest plate to him, and tries not to make any embarrassing noises as he revels in how good it is.

When he looks up from his pastry, though, Luo Binghe is subtly pushing another plate towards him. Shen Yuan raises a brow at him.

"...Which one will Shizun like best," Luo Binghe grits out, as if asking for the advice physically pains him. "Your world's cuisine… The flavors are more intense than what this Lord is used to, so Shen Yuan should know the standards best."

Shen Yuan hums, obligingly picks up a second dessert, and surveys the selection of freshly prepared baked goods as he munches on it.

"Something with few common allergens," he says. "No nuts, nothing you made with almonds."

Luo Binghe puffs up like an insulted cat. "You didn't even try them all," he accuses. "Why are you making choices now?"

"Binghe, if I try one of all of these, you'll have to roll me out the door to meet your former mentor," Shen Yuan says, rolling his eyes. "I'm sure they're all good."

Luo Binghe scowls, but starts mutinously packing up a small tin of cookies following Shen Yuan's instructions. He's already gotten dressed in the clothes Shen Yuan had taken him out to get fitted in the other day -

("Ah, remember to ditch the fanny packs when you wear these," Shen Yuan had said as he'd been paying for Luo Binghe's new clothes.

"...Is Shen Yuan daring to imply that the pocket attachments he gave me are not, in fact, popular and fashionable in his world after all?" Luo Binghe had asked sweetly.

"..."

"Shen *Yuan,"* Luo Binghe cried, "I'll make *you* wear them, then - where else am I supposed to put my things? You have no qiankun pouches, no qiankun sleeves!"

"And what, exactly, do you need to carry that doesn't fit in your normal pants pockets? No knives!"

"..."

Luo Binghe silently held his dual fanny packs a bit closer.)

- and Shen Yuan himself doesn't take long to get ready. It's with surprisingly little fanfare that they head out the door, walk to the nearest train station, and find themselves at the meeting place.

Shen Yuan had invited the actors out to an upscale brunch place. The 'private rooms' for reservation here were more like half hidden nooks, just enough privacy that small stars could feel comfortable removing masks and hats but still somewhat within the public eye. Whether that small amount of public visibility was meant to reassure the actors that Shen Yuan hadn't lured them away to quietly do away with them, or if it was meant to reassure Shen Yuan himself that Luo Binghe might possibly behave a bit better with more people watching…

Well, either way, Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan arrive at the brunch place and are directed to their seats before the actors themselves get there.

The building is divided somewhat in half, with the more private nooks on a partial second story overlooking the rest of the building. Although the tables up there aren't pushed up against the railing, it only takes the effort of standing up from the nook you'd been seated at and walking several steps to peer over the balcony to get a view of the lower story - and, more importantly, a view of the front door.

"Sit *down,"* Shen Yuan scolds quietly, for what must have been the third time in as many minutes.

Luo Binghe turns to take a step back towards their table, hesitates, and then turns back to peer over the railing again. His expression is carefully made to look disinterested, but with how eagerly he's watching the front door…

Ah, it really is a bit pitiful!

Shen Yuan sighs, getting up from the table to go stand by Luo Binghe at the railing. "They'll probably be wearing face masks," he offers.

"I don't need to know that," Luo Binghe scoffs. "I'll recognize him."

Shen Yuan casts a glance over at Luo Binghe. His eyes are still locked on the front door, gaze intense even as he tries to maintain his neutral expression.

Hesitatingly, Shen Yuan reaches out to pat his arm a few times. He isn't sure if the action is meant to be reassuring or just something to grab Luo Binghe's attention, but either way, Luo Binghe finally tears his gaze away from the front door to look at Shen Yuan.

"I've been meaning to say this, but… Binghe, ah, you know these people are actors, right? Being unrecognizable is… kind of their job."

"And recognizing Shizun is *mine."*

"I know, I know," Shen Yuan placates. "Just… if they show up and neither of them look exactly like how you remember, try to stick it out a bit, okay?"

Luo Binghe makes a noise of general dissatisfaction with that sentiment, but before he can bicker about it in earnest, the front door of the restaurant opens to let a couple of people in caps and masks walk in.

Luo Binghe abandons his previous protests immediately, straightening up and casting a frantic glance at Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan sighs. “Yeah,” he says, “that’s probably them.”

“And?” Luo Binghe prompts him.

“...And?”

Luo Binghe huffs, tilting his head just-so and somehow causing the light to catch his eyes in a way that should *really* be reserved for stunning amber sunsets and not mediocre restaurant lighting.

“And?” Luo Binghe drawls, shifting his arms in a way Shen Yuan is *sure* is just meant to subtly flex his muscles.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “Yes, yes, you’re very pretty, not a hair out of place, ready to woo your precious Shizun.”

Luo Binghe preens, flexing a bit more and tossing his hair over one shoulder. “Of course I am. I don’t need you to tell me that, obviously.”

Shen Yuan only barely doesn’t laugh. “Obviously. Just be nice, and be *normal,* and you’ll be fine.”

“Hm,” Luo Binghe says, giving up on his showboating to reach out and flick Shen Yuan’s glasses up, not dislodging them entirely but very purposefully unbalancing them.

“Ah - hey!” Shen Yuan cries, but in the time it takes him to reach up and adjust his glasses, Luo Binghe has breezed past him to greet the actors as they come up the stairs to the balcony seating.

Ah, this brat better appreciate my generosity, letting him get away with that so he could save face in front of his childhood crush! Shen Yuan mentally bemoans, but he follows Luo Binghe over to do his own set of introductions.

“Thank you both for coming out to meet us,” he says, leading them all back to the table they’d booked. “It means a lot to Luo Binghe, here.”

“Of course,” one of them says - Ma Xiaoli, the younger of the two - not even glancing at Luo Binghe. “To be able to do Shen-ge a favor, the honor is mine.”

Shen Yuan blinks, a bit taken aback by the informality, but laughs awkwardly and shrugs it off. He knew it would be like this, after all - half the reason these small stars had probably agreed to meet a random fan at all was probably just to get the chance to suck up to a member of the Shen family.

Ah, Shen Yuan really, really hates the popularity contest that the entertainment circle is!

The other actor - Xiang Jiayi - nods along but doesn't say much as they get seated at the table. He looks vaguely uncomfortable; Shen Yuan wouldn't be surprised if it had been Xiang Jiayi's agent who had urged him to agree to this meeting, rather than Xiang Jiayi himself.

Shen Yuan shoots a glance to one of the nearby tables, where both actors' staff are getting settled. Though they all look mostly alert enough to be doing their jobs of keeping watch for their talent, one of them in particular seems to be trying to urge Xiang Jiayi on with his eyes to be a bit more lively. Shen Yuan tries not to laugh.

Next to Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe catches Shen Yuan's amusement and spares a glance at the support staff as well, but very quickly turns his attention back to the actors in front of them. Neither of them have taken off their masks yet - likely waiting until the wait staff takes their order and then leaves them be - and Luo Binghe is clearly studying them with a critical eye.

Or, well, maybe only 'clearly' studying them from the eyes of Shen Yuan, who expects it from Luo Binghe. Outwardly, Luo Binghe has pasted on his most charming of smiles - the one he'd used that awful morning early on in their acquaintanceship when Luo Binghe had tried to seduce Shen Yuan with pick up lines straight out of a bad erotica.

"This Luo Binghe was too excited for this meeting and couldn't help himself; if it's pleasing to you, please feel free to try the cookies I brought as a small gift." Luo Binghe says sweetly, gesturing to the cookie tin he'd set on the table.

…Yeah, that goody-two-shoes act is still creepy, coming from Luo Binghe. At least it isn't aimed at Shen Yuan this time!

"We can't eat food from fans," Xiang Jiayi says bluntly, and Shen Yuan forgets about Luo Binghe's gross flirting skills for a moment to wince. Ah, he'd… somehow forgotten about that… he'd gotten too used to informal meet and greets at conventions and such, where artists happily took snacks from fans!

Shen Yuan glances at Luo Binghe, waiting for him to say something. *'Oh, I'm not a fan, I'm your future husband sweetheart darling,'* or something else equally as cringe as Shen Yuan has grown to expect from Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe is only watching Xiang Jiayi quietly, though, his smile still in place but his eyes coldly assessing. What, was Xiang Jiayi's response really worth that much thought? Say something, ah!!

"If it's helpful to Xiang Xiansheng, I could eat a piece in front of him?" Shen Yuan tries. "Binghe really was hoping to get to share some of this with you both today - it's quite tasty, I assure you!"

"Ah, if it's something Shen-ge likes…" Ma Xiaoli demures, and Shen Yuan's nervous grin struggles not to turn into a grimace.

"Please, Ma Xiansheng should try it based on Binghe's merits, not my own tastes, haha…"

Under the table, Shen Yuan steps on Luo Binghe's foot. Luo Binghe jolts slightly, continues to say nothing, and immediately goes on the offensive to step on Shen Yuan's foot in revenge.

No, you idiot! Shen Yuan tries to beam into Luo Binghe's mind through force of will alone, *I'm not trying to play footsie with you over here! That was a warning to stop letting me field the conversation!!*

Whether Luo Binghe receives the message or not, he does finally launch into a pleasant spiel about his passion for being in the kitchen. Shen Yuan smiles blandly and tries to fade into the background, but the conversation…

"- it's of course the beautiful smiles of the people who I get to feed that make me most happy," Luo Binghe says sweetly, as if he hasn't spent the last several weeks baring his teeth at Shen Yuan from across the table over all of their meals. *What smiles, ah?!*

"Oh, what a gentleman," Ma Xiaoli laughs behind his hand. "Shen-ge, being raised as well as you were, did you also learn how to cook growing up?"

"They probably had cooks," Xiang Jiayi mumbles. "What would he need to cook for?"

"I grew up normally enough," Shen Yuan starts to explain, but Luo Binghe makes a noise in the back of his throat - clearly amused, clearly full of his own thoughts about Shen Yuan's cooking ability - and Shen Yuan steps on Luo Binghe's foot under the table again but quiets down.

…The conversation is really unbearable!!

"Oh, Shen-ge is humble, too," Ma Xiaoli hums, his head propped up on one hand.

"That - well - Binghe had a much more interesting childhood!" Shen Yuan protests, starting to feel a bit sweaty. He really, really does not want to be the focus during Luo Binghe's date(s)!

The slight amusement Luo Binghe had displayed earlier at the thought of Shen Yuan cooking slips from his face.

"This Binghe would rather talk about the present than the past," he says, his smile a bit tight. Then he pauses, turning his focus once more on the two actors sitting across from him. "Though when in such pleasant company, it's also good to talk about the future."

"We can't divulge future plans to fans either," Xiang Jiayi says as if reading from a rule book. Then he glances in the direction of where his agent is sitting, hesitates, and adds: "Sorry."

Shen Yuan stares at Xiang Jiayi a bit incredulously. This man… is this weird private brunch this star's first fan meet?? Turning down the cookies so bluntly was one thing, but how could someone mistake Luo Binghe's flirting as fishing for industry news?? And - and even if Luo Binghe *was* looking for information, there's much more honeyed ways to refuse someone than this! No wonder your agent is so clearly worried for you, ah!!

Beside him, Luo Binghe is also watching Xiang Jiayi. Shen Yuan has just enough time to think, *ah,* surely *Binghe will just steamroll over the awkwardness with more of his sugary flirting -*

"When it's time to place our orders, should this Binghe take the initiative to fetch your staff, or will they know to come on their own? After all, it seems Xiang Jiayi can't possibly afford to make a decision without instruction from a ruleset, how will you know what to eat?"

- before of course, Luo Binghe does no such sugary flirting at all!!

Shen Yuan gives up on trying to save face for Luo Binghe and directly whaps him over the head.

"Binghe!" He scolds, voice hushed as if that would somehow make it less obvious to the people in front of them that Shen Yuan is telling off their potential future boyfriend. He immediately turns to the two actors and bows his head apologetically. "My most sincere apologies, Xiang Xiansheng, Binghe isn't - well, he -"

He isn't even house trained yet!! Shen Yuan cries in his mind. *This lowly one apologizes for thinking his dog was ready for socialization, ah!!*

Beside him, Luo Binghe smiles as sweetly as ever while Shen Yuan struggles to explain. Shen Yuan is going to forbid him from getting headpats for a *week* after this, so help him -!

Xiang Jiayi just nods, though. "Sure," he says, and then goes back to looking like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

…Hopeless!!

Ma Xiaoli laughs awkwardly, breaking the weird tension. "Ah, Shen-ge is just helping his friend out with this meeting, it's to be expected for things to go a bit awry, no need to apologize…"

"Ma Xiansheng is too forgiving," Shen Yuan says, mentally projecting the image of a hundred Bad Boy stars at Luo Binghe. *"Right,* Binghe?"

"Ma Xiaoli is indeed very kind," Luo Binghe agrees blandly. He does not apologize to Xiang Jiayi. Shen Yuan feels like he might cry blood.

"Shen-ge is far more kind-hearted than I," Ma Xiaoli says. "I've heard you volunteer at an animal rescue on the weekends, Shen-ge - that must be so fun!"

"Ah, no, that - uh, Ma Xiansheng must have heard wrong, it's my oldest brother who volunteers…"

"Oh," Ma Xiaoli says. His smile wavers, and he tries again: "Silly me! Shen-ge was the one who was caught buying treats for stray cats, that's right!"

"That… was my second oldest brother…" Shen Yuan knows his polite smile must look more like a grimace at this point. He throws a spiteful glance at Luo Binghe, then adds: "Recently,

though, I did adopt a dog."

"Shen Yuan -" Luo Binghe starts to protest, his own smile tight, but before he can say anything else Ma Xiaoli steamrolls over him.

"Oh, how lovely! A dog must suit Shen-ge well, it must be very friendly!" He says, clearly relieved to have a topic to focus on instead of dwelling on mixing Shen Yuan up with his brothers.

"Actually, he's rather poorly behaved," Shen Yuan complains. "He bites people for fun, can you believe that?"

Ma Xiaoli gasps. "Oh, how awful! Shen-ge should -"

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe interrupts, turning to Shen Yuan, "I thought Yuan-ge's dog was behaving better recently?"

Shen Yuan coughs to cover up a laugh. Luo Binghe, what's with the sudden switch in attitude!

"He was doing well for a bit," he allows. "Unfortunately, after teaching him a few tricks, it turned out he wasn't quite ready to make new friends."

"Oh, Shen-ge was looking for another dog to keep it company?" Ma Xiaoli asks.

"No," Luo Binghe snaps, cutting off Shen Yuan's half-formed thoughts about the absolute nightmare that two Luo Binghes in one place would be. "Yuan-ge only wants the one dog after all."

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. At least this… technically counts as a conversation between Luo Binghe and Ma Xiaoli, right? *Ma Xiaoli, please quickly fall in love with this dog so we can all go home!!*

Ma Xiaoli frowns. "I'm sure Shen-ge can speak for himself."

"Please, I'm happy to let you both talk," Shen Yuan says pleasantly. "In fact, you can just pretend I'm not here!"

"Yuan-ge -"

"Shen-ge -"

Ah, since when did I become everyone's Ge!!

By the time the wait staff has come by to take their orders, Shen Yuan is enormously relieved for the interruption. Between Ma Xiaoli's blatant attempts to suck up to Shen Yuan, Xiang Jiayi's clear discomfort and distaste for the situation, and Luo Binghe's…

Well, Shen Yuan doesn't really know what to say about Luo Binghe. He'd started out so well! Flirtatious in a way that made Shen Yuan want to throw up from the sweetness overload,

sure, but flirtatious nonetheless! And alright, maybe Xiang Jiayi's disinterest made it hard for Luo Binghe to crack his shell, and maybe Ma Xiaoli was far more interested in the Shen family than anyone named 'Luo,' but -

But surely, Luo Binghe didn't have to give up this fast?? What happened to all of Luo Binghe's intense declarations of how he'd be swooping his former mentor off his feet? What happened to the dedication that made Luo Binghe swear to kill his precious Shizun's theoretical husband to take his place??

If Luo Binghe isn't catching these small star's attention properly, isn't that just because he hasn't started flirting in earnest??

It isn't like Shen Yuan wants to witness another seduction attempt like what Luo Binghe had leveled at Shen Yuan in the past, of course, back when he'd profaned the "Luo Binghe" character by saying all sorts of awful lines. All *"my life has been shaped to please you"* and *"this Lord has been captivated by your sweet, small self"* - disgusting!! Out of character!! A terrible, bottom shelf erotica set of dialogue that absolutely no real person would fall for!

And yet… Well. Shen Yuan may be straight, but he knows what girls like! And - and what gay men might like, if he *really* had to think about it. So maybe Shen Yuan doesn't want to see Luo Binghe recite such awful pickup lines again, but he is well aware that Luo Binghe is capable of *real* flirting if he wants to. The way he plays with Shen Yuan, sometimes - getting into his space and leaving little flitting touches on his face and calling him cute or such nonsense - surely, if Luo Binghe were ready to woo his old teacher, he'd bring out those techniques?

What's with this half-hearted behavior, acting sweet for only a few minutes before giving up instead of bringing out the big guns??

Shen Yuan only has just enough time to wonder about this though - just enough time for their party to give their orders - before he's given the answer.

After the wait staff leaves, both actors relax somewhat. At the table next to them, Xiang Jiayi's agent makes some very obvious gestures for him to remove his mask and start smiling, and soon enough both actors have removed their masks to settle in for the meeting proper.

Beside Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe goes quiet, carefully looks over both actors' faces, and then… nods, as if expecting it. He must have come to his own conclusions about these actors' Potential Shizun Candidacy even before the masks came off, and decided he wouldn't bother to continue flirting with men he knew weren't who he was looking for…

As if!! Shen Yuan told Luo Binghe, ah! He told him these were actors, he *told* him that his so-called "Shizun" may not act or look the way he remembered from when he was a child! Why couldn't this misbehaving cosplayer just listen to him this once!!

"Ah, both Ma Xiansheng and Xiang Xiansheng are truly fit for the big screens," Shen Yuan says politely. "Binghe, don't you think -"

“They aren’t who I’m -” Luo Binghe starts to say, but before he can get very far, Ma Xiaoli frowns and interrupts him.

“It’s rude to interrupt Shen-ge like that,” he says. Shen Yuan looks at him a bit incredulously - little star, you just interrupted someone yourself to say that very thing??

Luo Binghe scowls. “Yuan-ge lets me, so what does it matter to you?”

“I most certainly do not,” Shen Yuan grumbles. Neither of them act like they heard him.

“Shen-ge shouldn’t have to put up with it,” Ma Xiaoli scolds. “Shen-ge is a *Shen,* don’t you know this much?”

“I’m far more familiar with *Yuan-ge* than you,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan has a moment of panic as he sees Luo Binghe’s lips start to curl in a sneer.

He can tolerate the embarrassment of Luo Binghe’s failed and then abandoned flirtation attempts, he can suffer through Luo Binghe’s occasional rude remark, but he really couldn’t stand it if Luo Binghe started snapping his teeth like a delusional teen wolf-boy in public!!

Grimacing, Shen Yuan resolves to do the one thing he’d sworn he wouldn’t - leave Luo Binghe unsupervised. If Shen Yuan is the cause of all of this, he’d just leave!!

“I’ll go, uh, check on our food,” Shen Yuan says, standing up from the table.

Beside him, Luo Binghe pushes his chair out just slightly, getting in the way of Shen Yuan’s efforts to shimmy out past him to the walkway. The sharp-toothed smile he sends Shen Yuan is very much his threatening one.

“Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe calls sweetly, “They only just took our orders, I’m sure they’ll come when it’s ready. No need to chase them down separately.”

Shen Yuan could hear the true meaning quite clearly: *Don’t you dare leave this table without me!*

“Ah, but, uh - I forgot there was a drink here I wanted you to try! I just have to, y’know, go put that order in *for you,”* Shen Yuan replies, putting perhaps just slightly too much emphasis on the ‘for you’ bit.

Luo Binghe, think this through!! If you let me leave, it’ll be better for you - you can have your potential suitors’ attention all to yourself! Even if things haven’t gone well so far, even if you’ve given up on thinking these men could be your Shizun, it can still be turned around!

“I’m not particularly thirsty,” Luo Binghe sniffs.

“Then I have to go to the bathroom…?” Shen Yuan tries.

“What a coincidence,” Luo Binghe says, standing as well. “So do I. Let’s go, Yuan-ge.”

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan starts, grasping at straws, but before he can say anything else Luo Binghe has snatched his hand to start pulling him away from the table. Shen Yuan can only grimace, turn to mouth a silent apology at the two actors left quietly confused at the table, and follow.

Luo Binghe leads them to the bathrooms with the confidence of a man who cases every place they go for exits, pulls Shen Yuan into the men’s single stall bathroom, and locks the door behind them.

“Binghe should really only pull his Shizun into bathrooms like this,” Shen Yuan complains. “You’ll give everyone the wrong idea.”

“Is that really what Yuan-ge wants to complain most about, right now?”

“If I started complaining from the beginning of my list, I’d never make it to the end,” Shen Yuan deadpans. “You - Binghe, can’t you at least *try* with those two?”

“They aren’t who I’m looking for,” Luo Binghe snaps.

“How could you possibly know, ah! And don’t tell me it was because they didn’t look like your old mentor - besides the fact that I told you earlier not to depend on that, I *know* you made your decision before you even saw their faces clearly.”

“You’ll just protest anything I say, so why should I bother to explain?” Luo Binghe sneers, gesticulating with jerky, irritated movements. “I told you I’ll know, and you only ever respond to tell me that maybe I won’t!”

“Because the impression you have of your old teacher is flawed!” Shen Yuan cries, throwing his arms up in the air.

“I know him *best,”* Luo Binghe snarls.

“You most certainly do not! At best, you know one possible face he put on, how could that be good enough to recognize him in a completely different situation? Going by a different name than what you know, wearing a different face -”

“Two,” Luo Binghe spits, “I know two possible faces Shizun wears, and they’re all he has.”

Shen Yuan sighs, frustrated. “Fine, then - tell me just how you thought those two measly versions of your Shizun - who is an *actor,* might I remind you - ruled out everything about those perfectly fine men out there!”

Luo Binghe snaps his teeth at Shen Yuan. They’re still standing just inside the bathroom, Shen Yuan pressed nearly to the door and Luo Binghe barely a foot away from him, so Shen Yuan has nowhere to go when Luo Binghe brings those teeth so close to his face. Shen Yuan can only stand his ground, irritated to be dragged around and snapped at when he just wants Luo Binghe to *try!*

So Shen Yuan doesn’t flinch, just glares up at Luo Binghe, and Luo Binghe glares back for several long moments, his teeth bared but his eyes searching Shen Yuan’s own. Finally, after

a stretch of only the sound of Luo Binghe's worked up breaths filling the space between them, Luo Binghe stands down. He steps back from Shen Yuan and moves to stand beside him instead, shoulder to shoulder as they both lean up against the door of the bathroom.

"My Shizun could be cruel," Luo Binghe says finally, his voice much quieter now. "He could be disinterested, and mean, but he was never *dull.* He was sharp witted, clever. If that Xiang Jiayi had been my Shizun, he'd have bitten me back when I insulted him."

Ah… That was… actually a bit concerning to hear about the man Luo Binghe so desperately was trying to chase after.

"...Binghe isn't *really* looking for someone known to be cruel, right?"

Luo Binghe snorts. "No. I hated that version of him. Yuan-ge said it himself, that there are multiple faces this man can wear."

"Then…?"

"When he wasn't cruel, he was exceptionally kind instead," Luo Binghe says, turning to look away from Shen Yuan to stare a bit morosely into the middle distance of the bathroom.

"Ma Xiaoli is nice," Shen Yuan hedges. *Perhaps overly nice,* he mentally tacks on. "Couldn't he be your Shizun?"

"My Shizun was *truly* kind," Luo Binghe corrects. "He - he dotes on the people he cares about, and scolds them when he's worried, and wants most for them to be safe and happy."

"Isn't that normal?" Shen Yuan asks, frowning. "Everyone is like that, if it's someone you care about."

Luo Binghe turns to look at Shen Yuan again, quietly taking in whatever expression Shen Yuan is wearing. Shen Yuan finds it nearly unbearable to just sit still under that intense gaze, and turns away so he doesn't have to see it.

"Besides, that doesn't rule out Ma Xiaoli," Shen Yuan adds. "He - well, he scolded you, right? And could be considered… doting…?"

Luo Binghe rolls his eyes, breaking the intense moment. "He mixed you up with both of your brothers," he says, as if that explains it all perfectly.

"That's understandable," Shen Yuan protests. "There isn't much information about me specifically out there, since I keep out of my family's business."

"No," Luo Binghe says simply. "If he was interested in you, he'd know that, and he wouldn't think the information he'd heard in gossip magazines could be about you specifically. Instead, he just remembered that what he'd heard had been tied to a 'Shen' and went with it. That man isn't kind; he's greedy."

"...Ah," Shen Yuan says, because he can't really protest something that he'd been secretly thinking too. He'd been the first to recognize the way Ma Xiaoli had been sucking up to him,

after all, and thought all the way back then about how much he hated the popularity contest the entertainment circle is.

“Yuan-ge understands, then?”

Shen Yuan sighs, dragging a hand over his face. “I do, but - Binghe, this… those two really are it. Of everyone who could possibly be your old mentor, those were the only two I could find.”

“Maybe Yuan-ge’s definition of who I’m looking for is wrong, then,” Luo Binghe says. “Maybe I don’t want whoever it is you think I do.”

Shen Yuan shakes his head, feeling a bit helpless. “Maybe *you* don’t want whoever it is you think you do.”

Luo Binghe falls quiet again. Shen Yuan listens to the way the sink is quietly dripping; whoever had been in here last hadn’t turned it off all the way. It’s a stupid sort of background track to Luo Binghe’s love story, but given how ridiculous the past couple months have been, maybe ‘stupid’ is fitting.

He gets where Luo Binghe is coming from, he supposes. It’s just… Shen Yuan thinks more and more that Luo Binghe isn’t really looking for a specific man after all, but rather someone who will make him happy.

“Maybe,” Luo Binghe finally says, after long enough that Shen Yuan had almost forgotten he’d been waiting for Luo Binghe to say anything at all. “But if - if I can’t have him, then I want someone just like him.”

“A smartass who treats their loved ones with basic decency?” Shen Yuan asks dryly. “If that’s all you’re looking for, maybe I should give you Internet access back - Binghe is sure to find plenty of assholes online that fit the bill.”

Luo Binghe huffs a quiet breath of laughter. “Yuan-ge doesn’t get it after all.”

“As if I could understand anything that comes from that crazy mind of yours,” Shen Yuan sniffs, knocking his shoulder gently into Luo Binghe’s. “Come on, one thing at a time - we still have to finish this brunch date.”

Instantly, Luo Binghe’s mood turns sour again. “I don’t want to,” he says, petulant as a child.

“Ah? You don’t want to go to the brunch your Yuan-ge set up special just for you?” Shen Yuan asks, turning and reaching up to pinch Luo Binghe’s cheek scoldingly.

“I don’t want to listen to those leeches tell Yuan-ge to get another dog,” Luo Binghe grumbles, brushing Shen Yuan’s hand away.

Shen Yuan laughs despite himself. Still, he catches the way Luo Binghe won’t meet his eyes, and he gets the feeling… Well, somehow, Shen Yuan knows Luo Binghe is just joking to avoid the real problem.

He supposes, if he were Luo Binghe - if he had spent the last week anxious to meet someone he'd been searching for for years, if he'd been up all night baking cookies and pastries that those potential someones hadn't even glanced at, if he'd found those people to be uninterested and boring and greedy and two-faced instead of clever and kind - well, if he were Luo Binghe, Shen Yuan wouldn't want to sit through a brunch date with those people either.

It… really is a bit tragic, trying to find someone to love you the way you want to be loved, isn't it?

"Alright," Shen Yuan allows eventually. "We can go home. One condition, though."

"I could say please and thank you?" Luo Binghe offers, and Shen Yuan snorts.

"You should say those things anyway," he grouses. "No, this time, when we get home, I want you to find your *own* hobby."

"I've already told you I don't need that sort of thing to impress my real Shizun," Luo Binghe complains, his voice just shy of a whine.

"What, and you don't need that sort of thing for yourself?" Shen Yuan clicks his tongue. "You only started playing video games because I thought it was a crime you hadn't before. What about what Binghe wants to do, ah?"

Luo Binghe regards him skeptically for a moment. Shen Yuan crosses his arms, turns his nose up, and adds:

"Also, I read that people like Binghe need lots of activity in their lives to stay out of trouble."

"You -!" Luo Binghe lunges for Shen Yuan, rubbing at Shen Yuan's head and snapping his teeth next to his cheek as if barely resisting the urge to bite him properly. "What does that mean, 'people like Binghe' - no one is like me!"

"We must be grateful for the small mercies," Shen Yuan agrees solemnly, reaching up to push Luo Binghe's face away. Luo Binghe bites at his fingers for his troubles, but when Shen Yuan catches his eye he looks amused, and Shen Yuan can't help but feel satisfied.

A troublesome, happy dog is much better than a troubled, unhappy one, after all.

"Alright, alright, get off me - if we're getting out of here, I still need to explain it to those poor actors out there who came all this way to meet you."

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe whines, "I read about something interesting the other day, can we try it out on those fools? It's called 'ghosting' and -"

Shen Yuan reaches past Luo Binghe to unlock the bathroom door, which Luo Binghe had still been leaning some of his weight on. Luo Binghe stumbles as the door swings out from behind him, looks up at Shen Yuan with an expression of utter betrayal, and doesn't *quite* manage to catch Shen Yuan as he uses that moment of weakness to dart past him.

“I’ll meet you outside,” Shen Yuan calls over his shoulder. “Be good while you wait!”

Shen Yuan makes his way back up to the balcony seating as quickly as he can without outright running, only glancing behind him briefly to verify that Luo Binghe had indeed begun skulking his way outside. He’d better say his goodbyes quickly, ah, or he wouldn’t put it past Luo Binghe to change his mind and follow Shen Yuan back up here!

“Ma Xiansheng, Xiang Xiansheng,” Shen Yuan calls as he approaches the table.

The two actors, who’d been silently scrolling through their phones, startle a bit and try to look a bit less like they’d gotten bored. Shen Yuan quickly waves the issue away - he gets it, he gets it, he’d have pulled out his phone too if his lunch date had suddenly vanished to the bathroom for that long!

“Something came up,” Shen Yuan says apologetically, keeping his expression impassive even with how painfully inadequate that explanation feels. “Of course, you both will still be paid in full for taking the time to come meet us, and your meals will be paid for before we leave as well.”

After all, there’s no need to give a proper explanation or be embarrassed if his parent’s money can solve the problem!!

“Is everything alright?” Ma Xiaoli asks, expression a bit pinched. “Shen-ge isn’t being dragged around by that Luo fellow, is he?”

Shen Yuan… might be a little bit glad that Luo Binghe didn’t choose to pursue this Ma Xiaoli after all. Calling Luo Binghe like that, did this bootlicker really fail to remember the name of his “Shen-ge”’s friend, ah??

“I’m not,” Shen Yuan says a bit stiffly. Then he hesitates, glancing between the two actors.

It’s too late for this particular date to go well, obviously. Whoever Luo Binghe’s old mentor had been, whoever Luo Binghe had been looking for - even if that man was one of these actors, what Luo Binghe wants from a lover isn’t what these two actors are now. What Ma Xiaoli and Xiang Jiayi think of Luo Binghe doesn't really matter much, in the end.

But… well, just because Shen Yuan needs to know how he’s doing on training Luo Binghe to be a good future husband for someone - just because of that! - he can’t quite help but want to ask.

“Before I go, do you two - that is, about Luo Binghe… What do you two think of him?”

Xiang Jiayi stares at him for a moment before seeming to make some sort of connection. “Oh. I didn’t realize he wasn’t actually a fan. Ah… well, if he has the Shen family behind him, he’ll surely do well.”

“Well?” Shen Yuan echoes. “No, I meant - do you think he’s… likable?”

“He has a nice enough face,” Ma Xiaoli shrugs, though he looks a bit put out by whatever realization he and Xiang Jiayi have just had. “It’s as Xiang Jiayi said: so long as Shen-ge

backs him, he'll do alright in the industry."

Shen Yuan blinks at him. That… have these two really just come to the conclusion that Shen Yuan's secret motive for this whole brunch affair was to - what? Get some industry opinions on Luo Binghe, as if he were a small talent Shen Yuan had personally been raising up? Was it really so unthinkable that Shen Yuan just wanted to know if other people thought his Binghe was likable as a person, that not everything is about this stupid industry??

And even more alarmingly, this little star really had the guts to say Luo Binghe's face was only 'nice enough,' as if there were better ones out there? If these actors couldn't even see sense when it came to surface level observations like good looks, obviously they wouldn't know the first thing about whether someone is actually likable or not! These two probably wouldn't know the first thing about what makes for a good husband!!

Shen Yuan bristles, drawing himself up to stand a bit straighter.

Well, fine! He had already known these two would be useless when it came to the problem of Luo Binghe anyway, he shouldn't have bothered to ask! He can certainly find many other more intelligent opinions about Luo Binghe, and work based on those answers *only* when it comes to Luo Binghe's continued boyfriend training!

"Many thanks for your thoughts and time today," he grits out, bowing shallowly to the two actors still seated at the table.

"It was my honor to meet Shen-ge," Ma Xiaoli says sweetly. "If Shen-ge would ever like to meet up again after he's finished his work with that Luo…"

"Luo *Binghe,"* Shen Yuan can't help but correct, smiling sharply at him. If some small star is insistent on being rude to Luo Binghe, someone who isn't even in the room to defend himself, it's really only Shen Yuan's duty as a morally upstanding young man to fight back!!

So, spitefully, he reaches over to swipe the container of cute little cookies Luo Binghe had brought to this brunch off the table. These two wouldn't be eating them, and he refused to see them go to waste! Luo Binghe had really been quite nervous when he'd made these, you know!! Even if his brand of 'nervous' was 'ready to start a fight at the slightest provocation'.... Well, regardless, they shouldn't go to waste!

"My most sincere apologies," Shen Yuan says with another shallow bow, cookies securely in his own hands. "I hadn't realized Ma Xiansheng struggled with memory issues, refined sugars can't be good for you. I'll have someone send a gift basket with more appropriate foods."

Ma Xiaoli goes a furious shade of pink. Beside him, Xiang Jiayi hides a snicker behind his hand. Shen Yuan simply turns on his heel and leaves - if he stayed much longer, who knows what other things he might have said, ah!

Luo Binghe is waiting for him outside the restaurant, pacing the stretch of sidewalk nearby irritably. When he hears the doors to the brunch place open as Shen Yuan steps out, his attention snaps to Shen Yuan, and some of the tension in his shoulders releases. Shen Yuan

feels vaguely like someone who's stepped outside to reunite with an anxious dog that had to be tied to a pole to wait as his master went inside for an errand.

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe greets, closing the distance between them with several long steps. He spends a moment looking Shen Yuan over - what, as if those small stars would've somehow decided to hurt Shen Yuan for some inane reason? - before his gaze lands on the small tin of cookies Shen Yuan had taken with him.

Suddenly feeling a bit embarrassed for having taken them, Shen Yuan clutches them a bit closer to himself. "Turns out those actors were allergic after all," he says blandly, looking away.

"To the almonds that Shen Yuan made sure weren't a part of this particular recipe?" Luo Binghe asks wryly.

"To good things," Shen Yuan grumbles.

Luo Binghe snorts. Shen Yuan relaxes, finally looking back up at Luo Binghe. This disobedient, pretty man… Ah, Shen Yuan suddenly feels a bit off-kilter. He got too riled up back there in defense of Luo Binghe, so to see Luo Binghe now….

Shen Yuan shifts to hold the cookie tin with only one hand, reaching up towards Luo Binghe's head with the other. Luo Binghe obligingly tilts his head down somewhat for easier access, a small smug grin on his face.

Shen Yuan takes the opportunity to deliver a satisfying smack to the top of Luo Binghe's head.

"You -!" Luo Binghe cries, jerking back away from Shen Yuan's hand. "You dare scold me like this? For no perceived offense?!"

Shen Yuan sniffs. "I'd spent too many thoughts thinking only good things about you to keep face in front of those actors - had to balance out the scale somehow, or else I'd wake up tomorrow having forgotten what a menace you are."

"And what's so wrong about thinking only good things about me?" Luo Binghe grumbles, rubbing his head and looking generally aggrieved.

"It'll go to your head," Shen Yuan says quite confidently. "First it'll just be you looking bullied like this when someone scolds you, next thing I know you'll be back to pulling knives out when you're insulted - and then all my hard work of training you better than that will have gone down the drain, ah!"

"This Lord isn't *bullied,"* Luo Binghe sniffs. His frown does look any less like a pout. "How could someone like me be bulliable?"

"What do you call this then, ah?" Shen Yuan scoffs, reaching out to pull gently at Luo Binghe's cheek. Luo Binghe bares his teeth at Shen Yuan half-heartedly, but doesn't make any real effort to escape from the cheek pinch.

“The tolerance of an emperor,” Luo Binghe says, words a bit distorted. ”Being a good boyfriend, even.”

Shen Yuan laughs, letting go of Luo Binghe’s cheek. “Ah, so you *do* agree that being obedient is good for this sort of thing, then!”

“Only for people like Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe says, finally dropping his kicked puppy act and letting his hand fall from his head back to his side. “After meeting those people today and seeing how much they liked the rich young master Shen Yuan, I can only assume it really is only you who likes that whole pitiful-and-obedient thing - everyone else really does still prefer money and power and good looks.”

Shen Yuan narrows his eyes at Luo Binghe, making a pinching motion with his fingers in a clear threat. “I could stand here and bully you all day, you know.”

“Yuan-ge is very normal and everyone has the same tastes as him,” Luo Binghe deadpans.

“Your Yuan-ge is also very well aware of what sarcasm sounds like,” Shen Yuan says, rolling his eyes. “But sure, I’m glad we agree.”

Luo Binghe snorts, turns to start walking away from the brunch place back towards the station they’d come from, and then pauses to look back at Shen Yuan. That look… it could mean any sort of thing, really. Luo Binghe might not remember the way back, the same way he always seems to need to be led around by Shen Yuan despite supposedly having lived here all his life. It could be to check that Shen Yuan is following him, or to make sure neither of those actors has come out the door after them.

Certainly, it would have some sort of meaning that would make it a normal and pragmatic glance back, and it wouldn’t have been meant to make Luo Binghe look extra pitiful, walking away with only a cuff over the head and some bullying and none of his expected head pats.

…

Shen Yuan sighs. Well, if it’s like that, there isn’t really anything Shen Yuan can do about it, he supposes.

“Binghe, come here for a moment.”

Luo Binghe obeys. When Shen Yuan gestures for him to bend down a bit, he narrows his eyes suspiciously, but in the end obeys again.

This time, Shen Yuan pets his head. “You did alright today, at least for the first part of all that,” he says.

“What a pitiful sort of praise to receive,” Luo Binghe grumbles, and Shen Yuan grins, ruffling Luo Binghe’s hair a bit.

“Most people do actually make it to the end of a date before leaving, even if they *do* hate the company. You should work on pretending you like people who aren’t your long lost Shizun,”

he says, amused. “Actually, you should probably work on *really* liking people who aren’t your long lost Shizun.”

“I tolerate *you,”* Luo Binghe protests.

“Tolerate?!” Shen Yuan squawks, his hair ruffling beginning to edge into hair pulling. “I feed you and clothe you and put a roof over your head, and you *tolerate* me?!”

“Isn’t it I who usually feeds you?” Luo Binghe asks, clearly amused even as he reaches up to swat Shen Yuan’s hands away now that all Shen Yuan is doing is making a mess of his hair.

“You cook with ingredients I buy!!” Shen Yuan cries, still feeling righteously indignant.

Luo Binghe snaps his teeth at Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan mentally despairs that this happens to him frequently enough that he can identify this particular teeth-snap as one of the playful ones.

“Naturally, you buy the ingredients - that’s a standard part of such a sponsorship as the one Yuan-ge is offering me.”

“Oh, you -! Just you wait, I’ll buy you *awful* ingredients next time. Salted butter when you asked for unsalted, canola oil instead of peanut oil -”

“Yuan-ge’s idea of a punishment really is too unique,” Luo Binghe snickers.

Shen Yuan chases him all the way to their train station. One day, he’d show that silly boy for real, ah!

Chapter End Notes

bingge: if i cant have shizun, i want someone just like him >:(
sy: oh, you mean someone who's [describes himself]
bingge: ...yes

thank y'all as always for reading!! i'll start catching up on the comment backlog today but probably won't get through them all until tomorrow, so in the mean time, thank you also for the sweet comments you all leave - i really do love to read through them :'D

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe gets to choose the date spot this time, and absolutely nothing bad happens!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something in the dynamic between Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe undeniably shifts after the failed brunch date.

Luo Binghe is still rotten and intolerable, of course, but his disobedience seems to very rarely be about true defiance and more about being sly and bratty.

("I thought I'd told you to add another five Bad Boy stars to the board, after that brunch date disaster," Shen Yuan scolds after noticing that the Reward Board is actually looking a bit scarce on the naughty side. "How come it looks like there's *less* now, ah?"

"They're on there," Luo Binghe says vaguely. "With Yuan-ge so kindly taking care of this one, how could I disobey him?"

…Shen Yuan narrows his eyes and turns back to the Reward Board. Upon closer inspection, there were in fact twice as many stars on the Bad Boy side than it seemed on first glance - at some point, Luo Binghe had taken the time to meticulously stack the star magnets on top of one another, doubling up the Bad Boy ones so that for every two magnets it looked like he'd earned only one. The Good Boy stars are, of course, still lined up proudly and without any such tricks.

"See?" Luo Binghe says, sidling up to stand beside Shen Yuan. "Haven't I followed Yuan-ge's instructions to the letter?")

And Shen Yuan, for his part…

("...Well, it's good enough, I suppose," Shen Yuan sighs, absently reaching up to ruffle Luo Binghe's hair before pausing to glance at Luo Binghe mischievously. "Actually, with the way you are, I probably should have thought to give you this sort of handicap before, or there'd be no hope of you ever filling up the good side before the bad."

Luo Binghe bristles beneath Shen Yuan's hand like a cat with all its fur standing on end. "What handicap, this Lord could win any of Yuan-ge's games without a handicap -"

"Oh, okay," Shen Yuan agrees happily. "Your Yuan-ge misunderstood and thought you were trying to get away with something, but actually you just wanted a real challenge, hm?"

"...Yuan-ge, wait -"

Shen Yuan smiles brightly. "I guess this just means Binghe has to fill out the chart in all three dimensions in order to get any prize, good or bad. Have fun stacking your little magnets, you're a long way off from the good prize, haha!")

…for his part, Shen Yuan finds himself having far, far too much fun enabling Luo Binghe.

Not enabling him completely, of course! There was still plenty of real scolding where appropriate! When Luo Binghe tries to actually bite him instead of just generally making his weird biting gestures in the air nearby, or when Luo Binghe tries to throw out all of Shen Yuan's junk food claiming that he can make it better - y'know! Anything *really* worth scolding, Shen Yuan will step up to the plate!

It's just… well. It would probably be bad for a healthy young man like Luo Binghe to have *all* his fun stifled, is all! So where Shen Yuan can get away with it - where Shen Yuan himself has the most fun with it - he turns Luo Binghe's mischief back onto himself instead of really scolding him for it, and wrestles with him playfully instead of telling him off for *all* his bite attempts, and takes gleeful joy in the way Luo Binghe seems to gravitate towards the same sort of petty fun that Shen Yuan himself enjoys.

It's kind of exciting, if Shen Yuan lets himself think about it. It's like getting to have a particularly spiteful argument in the comment section of a webnovel, except the person he's arguing with knows how to bite back and has an IQ above double digits. Well, that and the fact that the 'argument' is about something inconsequential, and Shen Yuan is making his points while fighting a grin, and -

Okay, maybe that metaphor had gotten away from him, but Shen Yuan doesn't really know how else to describe it. Having fun with Luo Binghe feels different than the sort of fun Shen Yuan used to have with his high school friends, or with anyone he's chatted (argued with) online, or with any of the vaguely nice people his family has tried to get him to play nice with in the past. With Luo Binghe it's sharper somehow, and sometimes Shen Yuan feels inexplicably exhilarated from their shared teasing.

…Maybe that "sharper" feeling is a side effect of Luo Binghe being made of nothing but sharp teeth and mostly-harmless evil? The exhilaration from how riling Luo Binghe up is nothing short of poking at a wild animal with a stick?

Well, regardless, Shen Yuan finds it helplessly fun to gently bully Luo Binghe whenever he's acting like a brat. And after that awful brunch date, Luo Binghe's behavior shifts to almost *always* being a brat that's good for bullying, and so the overall dynamic between them ends up a bit…

…friendly?

Shen Yuan almost chokes on his own spit at the realization when it hits him. Having fun was one thing - everyone has a little bit of fun, when tormenting a nemesis or weird little brat of a sibling - but *friends* -!

“You - *ack* - ah -” Shen Yuan chokes, rapidly processing the crisis that is ‘this troublesome roleplayer may actually have become Shen Yuan’s friend, what the fuck.’

Luo Binghe reaches over to thump him on his back - and *jeez,* that might actually break something new in him instead of fixing any sort of choking problem, Luo Binghe clearly never skips arm day! - but still is sure to smirk smugly down at Shen Yuan as he does so.

“Yuan-ge, has this Binghe finally managed to make you speechless?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be able to think of ways to scold you even if I lose my voice completely,” Shen Yuan rasps, waving Luo Binghe off of him. “More importantly, Binghe, pay attention for a minute -”

“How come only you get to decide what’s important -”

“- are we friends??”

Luo Binghe’s voice dies in his throat, staring down at Shen Yuan a bit slack-jawed. Absently, because it’s just the sort of way things *are* between them now, Shen Yuan reaches up to gently flick Luo Binghe’s chin up, as if teasing him for letting his mouth hang open.

Then Shen Yuan realizes what he did, yanks his hand back as if he’d been burned, and holds it away from himself like it might infect him with more friendly nonsense.

“See?!” Shen Yuan cries, pointing at his diseased friendship hand with his other one. “That - that was a - are we *friends?!* Who let you be my friend, you’re insane - am *I* insane??”

Luo Binghe, who had been silently watching Shen Yuan have a minor panic attack, finally seems to come back to his senses.

“No,” he says, a bit slowly but with enough surety to briefly shut Shen Yuan up. “We can’t be friends.”

“Right, of course,” Shen Yuan laughs nervously. “How could we be friends? That’s -”

“We’re lovers,” Luo Binghe finishes, and then nods to himself, as if satisfied with that explanation.

It’s Shen Yuan’s turn to stare at Luo Binghe dumbly.

“And since we can’t be friends, it can’t be that Yuan-ge is being friendly,” Luo Binghe continues to explain. “You must be flirting, instead. Poorly, really, but I’ll take pity - this world seems to like a very different sort of courtship than what I’m used to, so Yuan-ge’s oddities can be excused.”

Shen Yuan continues to stare blankly.

“Ah,” he finally says, feeling as if his soul has floated very far away from his body. “I was wrong. I couldn’t be friends with a menace with no emotional intelligence like you after all.”

“Because you’re my boyfriend instead,” Luo Binghe clarifies, eyes narrowed down at Shen Yuan.

“Definitely not; I’m sponsoring you to be my live-in chef *only,”* Shen Yuan lies. “Anyway, stop trying to upgrade me from fake boyfriend to fake lover, what happened to your quest to find your perfect husband, hm?”

“I changed tactics,” Luo Binghe says, leaning in to snap his teeth playfully next to Shen Yuan’s cheek. “So long as Yuan-ge stops saying our relationship is fake, he doesn’t have to worry about my search anymore.”

“As if I was ever worried about your weird husband search,” Shen Yuan huffs, pushing Luo Binghe’s face away.

Then he pauses again and stares at the hand he had used to do that with complete and utter betrayal.

“Hnah?!!” He says, completely coherently. “Friends??”

What other explanation is there for the way Shen Yuan has found himself so comfortable with this wild dog, ah?! Playing around, having fun, indulging in some amount of mischief - that could be done with frenemies, which is a label Shen Yuan would accept putting on his relationship with Luo Binghe. But the casual touches, the light scuffling -

A real friendship would really be the only explanation as to why Shen Yuan ends up with his hands all over Luo Binghe’s face all the time, right??

“Lovers,” Luo Binghe corrects patiently, like a parent gently teaching their kid the definition of a new word.

“Luo *Binghe,* I will make you cook with *nothing but non-organic ingredients* -!”

Luo Binghe snaps his teeth at him again, dances out of range of Shen Yuan’s very vicious and dangerous swipes, and that is the end of that.

…Or, it should be.

Something about that conversation niggles at the back of Shen Yuan’s mind though, and combined with the weird, sad preconceptions that Luo Binghe has already been proven to have about his future husband and/or missing Shizun…

Ah, Shen Yuan is really too soft for this not-friend of his!

And so later, when Shen Yuan is helping Luo Binghe with the dishes, he can’t help but ask: “You… *do* know that you can be friends with someone you’re dating, right? Actually, you *should* be. Uh, when you quit being a rented boyfriend, I mean.”

“Can you?” Luo Binghe asks, sounding genuinely curious. “I’ve found those things to be quite exclusive of one another.”

“You’ve got to have *something* to talk about when you’re not - uh, y’know, doing boyfriend-girlfriend stuff.”

“Boyfriend-boyfriend stuff,” Luo Binghe corrects. “And anyway, Yuan-ge doesn’t have to worry about what’s keeping me busy. Between trysts is the best time for doing things you wouldn’t approve of; if we were friends on top of lovers then you’d just get in the way of that.”

“Ah,” Shen Yuan says, understanding. “So you’re actually just this sort of lonely person…”

Luo Binghe scowls, shoving the plate he’d just finished cleaning in Shen Yuan’s direction without even looking at him. “If you’re going to insult me, at least be creative about it.”

“Hey, I’m genuinely worried for you, here!” Then he pauses, realizing what Luo Binghe had said earlier. “Wait, what do you mean, ‘things I wouldn’t approve of,’ ah? What have you been getting up to when I’m not looking??”

Instead of replying, Luo Binghe angles the spoon he’s washing to deflect the tap water straight into Shen Yuan’s face. Shen Yuan splutters, quickly dropping the plate he’d been drying so he can wind up his dishtowel and thwack it in Luo Binghe’s general direction. Luo Binghe catches the towel easily, though, and uses his grip on it to tug Shen Yuan closer to the sink where Luo Binghe can more easily splash him.

“You -!!” Shen Yuan cries, letting go of the towel so he can backpedal away and glare up at Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe meets his gaze easily, grinning toothily down at him.

Shen Yuan narrows his eyes, reaches blindly behind him for a weapon, and ends up with a rubber spatula. Eh, good enough.

Many minutes and wasted water later, the two of them sitting on the kitchen floor surrounded by puddles and dish soap, Shen Yuan laughs helplessly.

“I don’t even remember what I was trying to scold you for,” he says, breathing a bit heavily from the very manly exertion of having a water fight with his roommate. “What did you do this time, again?”

Luo Binghe sniffs, ringing water from his hair. He looks like a wet dog that just finished playing with a sprinkler. “I have no idea what Yuan-ge is talking about.”

“No, no, I have to remember so I can decide whether or not I’m going to bully you into cleaning up this mess by yourself,” Shen Yuan snickers. “What was it - an act of evil you were carrying out behind my back because you thought we weren’t friends, or something?”

“...Are we really friends?” Luo Binghe asks.

Shen Yuan sighs heavily, as if such a thing is terribly burdensome to think about. “Maybe,” he says. “Depends on if you’re willing to let me in on all your evil plans, I guess.”

Luo Binghe watches him intently for a moment. Finally, his lips hook up in a small grin, and he flicks his fingers at Shen Yuan to send a few last drops of water his way. “Well, I have heard that couples that scheme together stay together.”

“Friends,” Shen Yuan corrects, wiping uselessly at his face as if that would make him any less wet.

“Hm,” Luo Binghe says. “Does Yuan-ge want to hear about my current plans to besmirch the reputations of those rude actors from Yuan-ge’s brunch date or not?”

Shen Yuan snorts. “See, this is *exactly* why you should be friends with your boyfriends, fake or not - if you hadn’t let me know you were about to get yourself arrested, how would I know to stop you?”

“I thought Yuan-ge was going to be my friend,” Luo Binghe sulks. “A friend would assist with my revenge plans, not make silly attempts to stop them.”

“Ah, don’t look so pitiful, shouldn’t you wait to hear what I have to say?”

“I can imagine,” Luo Binghe says, still looking far too sullen for someone Shen Yuan has finally decided to graciously bestow the ‘friend’ title to. “Yuan-ge will say ‘don’t make perfectly reasonable acts of righteous revenge’ -”

“Ah, ah,” Shen Yuan tuts. “I was in fact going to request very politely that you *do* make your acts of righteous revenge reasonable.”

Luo Binghe squints at him. “Then the problem is the definition of ‘reasonable’?”

“Correct. Think about what those small stars did to us, and be specific.”

“Disrespected Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe mutters.

“Hardly,” Shen Yuan says, blowing damp bangs out of his eyes. “They were a bit bad at being proper suckups, but they were still *trying* to be suckups. Well, at least one of them was. Anyway, that wasn’t the main problem - try again.”

Luo Binghe scowls. “Too familiar with Yuan-ge, then.”

Shen Yuan snorts. “What’s with this newfound respect you have for your Yuan-ge, hm? You should’ve discovered this weeks ago, ah!”

Luo Binghe turns away to glare at a soap bubble on the ground beside him. Shen Yuan smothers a laugh.

“Alright, because I’m feeling particularly nice, I’ll tell you the answer: I was very clear to them what the purpose of that brunch was meant to be, and they completely ignored it!”

“Yes, they disrespected Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe agrees, nodding solemnly.

"No, you weirdo, they disrespected *both* of us!" Shen Yuan says, rolling his eyes. "Seriously, where did this new attitude come from, ah? You're usually quite happy to disrespect me yourself!"

"Exactly," Luo Binghe sniffs, examining his claws. "That's my job. It's rude to play with an emperor's toys without permission."

"I *will* make you clean up this mess by yourself," Shen Yuan threatens. "Anyway, I told them I was hiring them specifically to do a meet and greet with you, and neither one of them paid you much attention at all!"

"We left to go have a rendezvous in the bathroom," Luo Binghe says smugly. "How could they greet me there?"

"Don't say it like that," Shen Yuan hisses, feeling his face heat a bit with embarrassment. "Aiya, you're always like this! And they had plenty of time before we left to make an attempt at a proper fanmeet for you!"

Luo Binghe pauses, blinking at Shen Yuan. He looks like he's thinking very hard about something for a long moment and then -

Then, Luo Binghe clearly comes to a conclusion he likes very, very much.

"Is Yuan-ge upset on my behalf?" He asks, and Shen Yuan scowls.

"Don't make things up, I'm just upset that I didn't get what I paid for!" Shen Yuan clicks his tongue, thinking about just *how* poorly those actors had failed their mission brief. "One of them refused to even remember your name, ah!"

"Yuan-ge *is* upset on my behalf," Luo Binghe says, smugly thrilled. Shen Yuan scowls harder.

"Who cares who's upset about what! Remember the game plan, Binghe - revenge, this is about revenge!"

Luo Binghe sighs - dare Shen Yuan even think it - a bit dreamily.

"It's been a long time since I've had a lover plan out revenge for me, I've quite missed it. Very well, then, we can do it Yuan-ge's way this time."

"To be clear, my way is the *friendship* way, don't make it weird" Shen Yuan mutters, glaring hard at one of the many soapy puddles on the ground. "But if you're going to listen, then good. There are three important points to a good spiteful revenge - does Binghe want to guess?"

"Memorability, public humiliation, and either emotional or physical pain."

"You really do concern me, sometimes," Shen Yuan sighs. "No, this isn't some dog-blood drama, we're not trying to actually hurt anyone! What's most important is that whatever we do is non-provable, non-aggressive, and fitting exactly to the thing we want them to regret."

"...Yuan-ge, what if you let this Binghe teach you how to make revenge romantic, and *then* you plan it for us both?"

"First," Shen Yuan says, happily ignoring Luo Binghe, "anything that can get linked back to us isn't worth it. Even if they can't prove we did it, if they can create any sort of public opinion that they're the victim of revenge, we've lost - this isn't a fantasy world where might makes right. As such, we need to choose only things that no reasonable person would think someone would ever plan out as revenge."

"If it can't be something that normal people would consider as revenge, how could that be revenge to begin with?" Luo Binghe grumbles.

"You have no creativity," Shen Yuan sniffs. "Just listen. Second, the non-aggressive clause: it has to be something that doesn't bother anyone quite enough to bother doing anything about it. They won't try to put together who was behind it, nor will they try to escape it."

"This is sounding less and less romantic by the minute," Luo Binghe sighs irritably.

"And *thirdly,"* Shen Yuan says loudly, "it has to match what they did to us. Revenge is about pettiness, obviously; it doesn't work unless we're giving them a taste of their own medicine, so any random irritation is also out."

"And what, exactly, do you propose to match those terms?"

"Easy - we pay off every coffee shop within the city to get their orders wrong for a week. No one would think to blame us for a series of unconnected mistakes, the irritation is not quite enough for them to seek any sort of solution, and it's perfectly in line with the way they failed to fulfill their own orders."

Luo Binghe blinks at him. Then, clearly against his own will, his lip twitches up and he brings a hand up to hide his growing smile. "Yuan-ge, you're really something after all."

"Of course I am," Shen Yuan says, flicking his hair off his forehead with just the correct amount of flair. "I grew up on the internet and my parent's money - of course I know how to do something like this."

"After all that you've scolded me, it turns out we're well-suited after all," Luo Binghe says, amused.

"Watch your mouth, or you'll be the next person I plan out an act of evil revenge against; obviously I'm only doing this to stop you from going too far on your own," Shen Yuan grumbles, pulling out his phone. "Now look closely, I'll teach you how to do this sort of thing discreetly - you listened to me when I told you to figure out VPNs on your own, right?"

Luo Binghe nods seriously - he may not enjoy being treated like an internet idiot, but he *does* enjoy learning anything that could be labeled as a stealth tactic - and scoots in closer to peer over Shen Yuan's shoulder at his phone.

Shen Yuan explains as he goes, teaching Luo Binghe how to make a convincing fake social media account and how to use gift cards to pay for things you don't want traced back to you. Luo Binghe watches quietly, only speaking up to call Shen Yuan soft when he makes sure to add stipulations to prevent any real harm from this sort of prank - no switching non-dairy products for dairy ones or adding any common allergens to the drinks in the name of getting a coffee order wrong.

"We're trying to irritate them, not send them to the hospital," Shen Yuan explains, rolling his eyes.

"Going to the hospital sounds irritating enough," Luo Binghe sniffs, and Shen Yuan elbows him sharply.

"Stop being a menace and pay attention, have you already forgotten what I said is most important when it comes to something like this?"

"Deniability, lack of any fun violence, and fitting to their crimes," Luo Binghe intones.

Shen Yuan sighs. "Close enough, I suppose."

Luo Binghe hums, pleased with himself. He's leaned in closer and closer while watching Shen Yuan, and now his head is practically hooked over Shen Yuan's shoulder. Ah, friendship really is weird, when it's with someone like Luo Binghe…

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe says, "have you ever thought about being a teacher?"

"And give up my comfortable freeloading NEET lifestyle?" Shen Yuan snorts, not even glancing up from his phone as he finishes up and carefully wipes the accounts he'd used. "No way. What if I got weirdos like you coming after me because of some childhood obsession they had?"

Luo Binghe leans in closer and bites Shen Yuan's cheek. Shen Yuan startles, nearly dropping his phone, and jerks away from Luo Binghe.

"You -! You actually bit me!" He cries, bringing his free hand up to press against his cheek. It stings slightly from the way Shen Yuan had wrenched himself away while Luo Binghe's too-sharp teeth were still pressed into his skin. "I knew you were half-rabid, but you've - you *actually* bit me, this time!"

Luo Binghe shows off his teeth. "Don't be a teacher after all," he says.

"Obviously!" Shen Yuan cries, voice just a bit too shrill for the manly image he carefully maintains. He coughs, turning away. His cheek still stings, ah, what the hell…

Maybe Shen Yuan should invest in a muzzle? At this point, Shen Yuan clearly isn't capable of kicking Luo Binghe out, so he needs *some* sort of replacement punishment for when Luo Binghe inevitably fills out his Bad Boy stars.

Shooting one last aggrieved look in Luo Binghe's direction, he finally stands from the soapy floor and puts his phone away. He feels undeniably soggy, ugh…

“Alright, Binghe,” he sighs. “What are we doing today? After you clean up this mess you made all by yourself, obviously.”

Luo Binghe narrows his eyes at him, standing as well. “...You don’t want to find a way to spectate those fools as our revenge is delivered to them?”

“Absolutely not,” Shen Yuan says. “I give it - oh, maybe three to five hours? - before my brothers somehow find out what I’ve done, and I don’t want to be anywhere near the mess I’ve made when they find it.”

“They don’t share Yuan-ge’s tendencies for ‘non-provable mischief,’ then?”

“Oh, they most certainly do,” Shen Yuan corrects. “In fact, my Er-ge has got to be the best at that sort of thing out of anyone. He is also, unfortunately, a complete hypocrite and has somehow convinced himself that he’s personally responsible for how I perform in society.”

“Hm,” Luo Binghe says cryptically, eyeing Shen Yuan’s stained pajama pants and ratty shirt. Their conditions are not helped by the fact that they're half-soaked now.

“Don’t start agreeing with him, I’m warning you!” Shen Yuan scowls. “Anyway, he’ll somehow hear those actors complain about a mistaken coffee order, and somehow know I’m the one behind it, and somehow come to the conclusion that all of that means he needs to blow up my phone with all sorts of scolding.”

“He sounds very much like someone related to Yuan-ge after all,” Luo Binghe says, amused.

“So,” Shen Yuan continues, summarily ignoring Luo Binghe. “We need something to do today that will be a great excuse as to why I’ll be out of the house with my phone off. Ideas, Binghe, we need *ideas.”*

Luo Binghe hums consideringly. “...Anything?”

“Anything not liable to add *more* missed calls to my phone notifications when I turn it back on later.”

Luo Binghe’s eyes practically sparkle with how bright they are, which paired with his toothy grin is an expression so blinding Shen Yuan thinks it should be outlawed on pure principle. Who allowed this feral dog to look so cute when he’s this happy, ah??

“Yuan-ge can’t take it back,” Luo Binghe says.

“...Should I prepare my last will and testament before we leave? A paid off eye-witness to our innocence?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Luo Binghe says, flipping his wet-dog mane of hair out over his shoulder. “Yuan-ge was the one who wanted me to find a hobby, right?”

Shen Yuan blinks. “Oh, well - if it’s for that, it probably isn’t that bad, I suppose.”

Luo Binghe’s sharp-toothed grin grows bigger.

Luo Binghe - after printing out a set of directions from online onto actual paper like a boomer who doesn't know how to use a maps app on their phone - leads them to a paintball course.

Shen Yuan didn't even know they *had* paintball so near to where he lived, what the fuck?

"Some parts of your world are quite good," Luo Binghe says, clearly playing at being nonchalant about it even though his eyes are still bright with excitement.

"Why is it always guns with you?" Shen Yuan asks, resigned to his fate.

Luo Binghe waves the concern away, though. "You can get ballistic knives or other close quarters fake weapons to play with here, too." Then he pauses, looking at Shen Yuan pointedly. *"Fake* weapons," he repeats.

"Well, yeah, I'd *hope* so," Shen Yuan grumbles, not really getting Luo Binghe's excitement.

"You can fight, but no one gets hurt beyond a few bruises." Luo Binghe turns away from Shen Yuan to look back at the paintball storefront in front of them, nearly vibrating with energy. "They even made it colorful."

"...So?"

"So, it's a *game."* Luo Binghe explains, grinning toothily. "War strategy, field positioning, stealth takedowns and brute force strength - all of those things, but made harmless. You can fight alongside friends without worrying about them, or you can just get up and leave if you're done without thinking about the consequences, because no one is really going to get hurt."

"Oh," Shen Yuan says, finally getting it.

Luo Binghe had taught himself how to fight growing up - Shen Yuan had already known that, just like he'd known that Luo Binghe had likely had to learn such a thing out of necessity. And, despite the circumstances under which Luo Binghe had probably been in when he had to learn how to fight, the Luo Binghe of today still clearly has a penchant for it. Beyond just clearly being fascinated by high-tech weapons, Luo Binghe likes wrestling with Shen Yuan, as pitiful of a "fight" that must count as.

Recreational fighting, designed so that no one really gets hurt and the focus can all be on feral fun of it - actually, doesn't this sort of thing suit Luo Binghe quite well?

"Your Yuan-ge understands, now," he says, amused. "I wasn't exercising you well enough, and now you need to let out some pent up energy, hm?"

"I have plenty of ideas for how Yuan-ge could give me more of a work out," Luo Binghe says smugly, turning back to Shen Yuan to leer down at him. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes and reaches up to flick at his forehead. "But today I want to do this."

“Sure, sure,” Shen Yuan says. “Honestly, though, there’s plenty of ways we’ve turned ‘fighting’ into a game, you know. Wrestling, boxing, fencing, I think there’s even a small rugby team at the university nearest us - oh, fuck, no, are you going to be a *sports guy?!”*

Luo Binghe barks out a laugh. “Yuan-ge, I’ve seen online that you can’t become a sports player without a cheerleader, so Yuan-ge will have to -”

“If you even think about trying to get me in some weird little uniform I will personally make sure every casual sports team within a 50 kilometer radius bans you from their teams,” Shen Yuan deadpans.

“We’ll revisit this,” Luo Binghe promises, and Shen Yuan scowls at the threat. “Yuan-ge is right, though - I want to try those games too.”

Shen Yuan nods, expecting it. “As tragic as it is to lose a fellow nerd to sports, I think that would suit you. Why paintball first, then?”

“Yuan-ge would get blown over by a strong wind; how could he survive a contact-based fight?” Luo Binghe asks, clearly amused. Shen Yuan bristles, but before he can protest, Luo Binghe says: “I want to play with Yuan-ge today. With the paintball guns, we’ll be on equal footing - at least in terms of weapon proficiency.”

“Hey, what’s with that qualifier?”

“Of course, Yuan-ge will have to defer to me when it comes to strategy, stamina, and -”

“I get it, I get it, be quiet, ah!”

“Also,” Luo Binghe adds, looking quite pleased with himself, “I do want to see a gun up close.”

“Of course this just comes back to your weird obsession with every high-tech weapon you’ve read about in the last couple months,” Shen Yuan sighs. “A paintball gun won’t be like a real gun, you know.”

Luo Binghe sniffs, turning his nose up. “Then Yuan-ge will just have to take me to see a real one later.”

“You’re such a brat,” Shen Yuan laughs. “Come on, then, let’s go play your fake war games.”

Luo Binghe confidently leads them inside and up to the counter for registration and rental gear, confidently rattles off a list of demands to the poor guy working the counter, and then confidently looks over at Shen Yuan with the clear expectation for him to step in to pay for it all.

“When did you get this spoiled, ah,” Shen Yuan says, even as he takes out his phone to pay. “At least say ‘please’ properly, don’t just stand there batting your eyes at me expecting that to be enough for me to pull out my wallet!”

The worker behind the counter is not quite fast enough to hide a snort of amusement. Shen Yuan resists the urge to set Luo Binghe on him like an attack dog, only rolling his eyes as he puts his phone away - not, of course, before he remembers to put the damn thing on silent. He really doesn't want to hear his brother scold him until he can't avoid it anymore, ah!

"It worked well enough if you paid anyway," Luo Binghe says, watching the worker like a hawk as he starts fetching various protective gear for them. Shen Yuan takes his distraction as an opportunity to cuff him over the head.

There is, admittedly, quite a lot of gear that has to be rented out just for a one time event. Goggles, a paint friendly jumpsuit, a harness to hold ammunition, the paintball gun itself - Shen Yuan stops bothering to count it all and just resigns himself to following Luo Binghe's instructions of what to put on where, since it's quite clear that Luo Binghe has researched enough about all this to have some sense of it.

Luo Binghe has done enough research, in fact, that he claims he does not need to go through the mandatory safety lesson the staff direct them to.

He also immediately shoots his own foot with his paintball gun the second he gets his hands on it. It leaves a bright pink splotch of paint on Luo Binghe's shoe.

Shen Yuan tries not to laugh too much at him as he herds them to the indicated safety lesson room, and they line up with the handful of other people who had signed up to play at this time slot. It doesn't seem too busy but there's still enough people to split into two decent sized teams, though Luo Binghe doesn't even glance at the other two people assigned to their team.

Shen Yuan considers at least introducing himself to them in some facsimile of friendly teamwork, but…

He glances at Luo Binghe, who is peering down the barrel of his own gun - with his hands nowhere near the trigger, this time - and very blatantly ignoring the safety instructor.

…Yeah, it's probably actually better for everyone if he just focuses on keeping Luo Binghe from shooting his own eye out rather than playing nice with their randomly assigned team mates.

Luckily, the idiot paying more attention to his gun than the instructions and the clearly out of shape young master aren't wildly desirable teammates, and they make it through the full safety lesson and into the paintball course without any social incidents. They have to wait several minutes for the other team to trudge over to the other side of the course before the match can start, and Luo Binghe takes this time to finally look up from his fancy new gun.

"Keep up with me once we begin," he says.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. "You're free to run ahead of this old man, just don't commit any crimes where I can't see."

Luo Binghe frowns. "I made myself clear earlier - I want to play with Yuan-ge today."

“There’s no way I can move as fast as you - you’re freakishly tall so your stride is freakishly long,” Shen Yuan says, as if that’s the main difference between them and not their general level of physical aptitudes.

Luo Binghe frowns harder, dropping one hand from his paintball gun to reach over and nudge at Shen Yuan’s goggles. “Did you tighten these properly?”

“Not even fussing over your Yuan-ge like this will make you look cute after I just watched you shoot your own foot ten minutes ago,” Shen Yuan says as he bats away Luo Binghe’s hand, amused. “Just say what you want to say.”

“Just as I thought, you tightened them too much,” Luo Binghe says. “If you’re thinking I might be ‘cute’ instead of devastatingly seductive while holding a weapon, the blood must not be flowing to your brain correctly.”

“I just said you *weren’t* cute, don’t get it wrong, ah!”

“Regardless, Yuan-ge is clearly not thinking correctly; this is a ranged battle, so of course strategy is more important than speed. There’s no need for me to move too quickly.” Luo Binghe pauses, then repeats: “Keep up with me.”

Shen Yuan sighs, looking up at Luo Binghe wearily.

He doesn’t really have much of an interest in this sort of activity, truthfully - it’s better than a ‘real’ sport, but he still isn’t fond of the idea of running around and getting all bruised up from paint pellets. He had every intention of just idly following Luo Binghe around the arena, slowly and carefully remaining behind cover and not bothering too much with the actual shooting part.

But, ah… he had told Luo Binghe that they could do anything he wanted, today, and Luo Binghe had told him that he wanted to do this with Shen Yuan. With Luo Binghe frowning so earnestly like that at him…

“Okay,” Shen Yuan allows. “You’re a little bit cute after all, but don’t let it go to your head.”

Luo Binghe huffs, but clearly takes that as an agreement to his plans.

“I compiled images from people’s internet reviews of this battlefield until I could piece together the layout,” he says, using the barrel of his gun to draw a rough outline in the dirt. “We’re starting over here; when the signal to start is given, Yuan-ge will follow me through here to flank the enemy’s left side.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to be dragging your weapon through the dirt like that when you’ve already misfired it once?” Shen Yuan asks wryly.

Luo Binghe scowls up at him, pausing in his dirt drawings. “Yuan-ge, don’t talk about the past so much. I know how to use a gun very well now.”

Shen Yuan snorts. He hefts his own gun up, making sure the barrel plug is still securely in place - he just *knows* the starting signal is going to startle him, and if he misfires his own

paintball gun because of it Luo Binghe won't ever let him live it down.

"I'll just follow you," he says after looking his paintball gun over. "Don't lead your Yuan-ge into any stray bullets, okay?"

Luo Binghe stands up straight, his chest puffing out.

"Who do you think I am?" He says, and then the match begins.

Luo Binghe… still moves a bit too fast for Shen Yuan to keep to his 'no exercise' ideals, but he does keep to a pace that Shen Yuan can at least keep up with. Though, even if he is keeping up, Shen Yuan feels a bit awkward when watching Luo Binghe move with undeniable grace - clearly, if this is how Luo Binghe holds himself on what he considers a battlefield, the scuffles they've had in Shen Yuan's apartment are nothing of the sort to him.

This gracefulness - movement like an apex predator, smooth and confident and keenly aware of both his surroundings and the 'enemies' around them - of course makes it all the funnier when Luo Binghe misses every shot he takes.

"Yuan-ge is clearly enjoying himself," Luo Binghe grumbles as he reloads his gun, ducked down behind cover to avoid the returning fire of the woman on the opposite team he'd failed to hit.

"Oh, I am," Shen Yuan snickers, tucked carefully behind a short wall next to the crate Luo Binghe is using as cover.

"Perhaps you'd find it even more enjoyable to actually participate?" Luo Binghe snarks, popping up behind his cover to take another shot. He misses again.

"I don't know," Shen Yuan drawls, "I'm having *so* much fun as it is…"

Luo Binghe shoots him an aggrieved look.

"Yuan-ge said he'd play with me," he says, and - ah, fuck, he brought out the pout! It should really be illegal for someone as dangerous as this man to know how to pout, too!

Shen Yuan sighs, removing the barrel plug on his paintball gun. Luo Binghe's pout instantly disappears into a sharp grin, watching Shen Yuan eagerly.

"Peak your head up again," Shen Yuan instructs dryly, "I don't want them aiming at *me* when I do this."

"Ah, Yuan-ge, this is the true essence of war -"

"Oh, you don't want to see where my paint pellet lands?"

Luo Binghe obediently peaks his head out from behind his cover. Shen Yuan snorts but quickly moves to do the same, steadying the gun on the short wall and taking aim.

Luo Binghe gets shot by the enemy team.

The enemy team gets shot by Shen Yuan.

“Ha!” Shen Yuan crows, as if his shot had been nearly as clean as the one that landed squarely on Luo Binghe’s chest. A shot is a shot! “Looks like I’m your *ge* even here, Binghe -”

Shen Yuan gets shot by the enemy team.

Luo Binghe, who had been staring at Shen Yuan with wide eyes, bursts out laughing.

“You shot her leg,” he explains, still snickering. “Only body and gun shots count, Yuan-ge!”

“Eh?!” Shen Yuan whips around to stare at the person who had shot him. It is, indeed, the same woman he’d been so thrilled to shoot earlier. “Wait, no - how does that make sense, you couldn’t win a battle if you were missing a leg!”

“What, did you not watch the instructional video you dragged me to?” Luo Binghe asks, and -

Actually, Shen Yuan just remembered that you need to exit the field immediately after being shot, no time to stand around chatting, haha!

After Shen Yuan has dragged them both over to the resting area to wait out the rest of the match so they can join the next round, Luo Binghe picks up Shen Yuan’s gun from where he’d set it on the bench between them.

“Is yours different?” He asks, inspecting it carefully.

Shen Yuan glances up to make sure his barrel plug is back on the gun and that Luo Binghe isn’t likely to accidentally shoot himself again, then goes back to poking miserably at his shoulder that is now covered in vibrant blue paint. He can already tell he’s going to have a bruise, ah…

“They’re exactly the same,” he says. “It’s our abilities that are different, of course.”

“You’ve never fought a day in your life,” Luo Binghe retorts, bristling like an irritated cat. “How could that be?”

Shen Yuan gives up on his shoulder to grin lopsidedly at Luo Binghe. “What, disappointed you didn’t get to impress me with how cool you are in a fight?”

Luo Binghe turns away with a huff. Ah - bingo! Shen Yuan tries not to laugh.

“It was a lucky shot,” he says, taking pity on Luo Binghe even if he is still very much amused by the situation. “And even then, it didn’t count - we’re still even, if you’re counting.”

“I have no need for something petty like that,” Luo Binghe says as if he isn’t glaring down at his own gun and looking especially sullen. “Obviously, I’ll be the impressive one in the end.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes, but gently knocks his shoulder against Luo Binghe's, leaving a smear of blue paint behind.

"Don't worry - your Yuan-ge can be impressed by your strategy, instead. We really didn't get shot at all until you'd led us pretty solidly into their base; that was from the reconnaissance you'd done, right?"

Luo Binghe sits up a bit straighter. "Something like that is nothing," he says, even as he glances at Shen Yuan from under his lashes, clearly looking for more praise.

"Of course, of course," Shen Yuan laughs, "Binghe is too good at such things to need praise for it. But see - with your strategy and my lucky shots, it's a good team up, right?"

Luo Binghe jerks his head up, staring at Shen Yuan with those wide, startled eyes again. Shen Yuan has just a moment to feel satisfied with himself for putting that expression on Luo Binghe's face twice in one day, but then -

Then, of course, Luo Binghe grins sharply, his eyes practically gleaming with all sorts of evil plans.

"Wait, wait, don't get any funny ideas," Shen Yuan backpedals.

"Yuan-ge, for the next round, listen to this…"

And so begins the real battle. Luo Binghe enters each round with all sorts of plans Shen Yuan definitely hates and does not enjoy at all - the worst of which has Shen Yuan on Luo Binghe's shoulders so he can take a shot over a high wall that no one is watching - and Shen Yuan is given very clear instructions about his new role as their marksman.

Luo Binghe still takes his own shots, of course. He even - just once - manages to hit someone, though the time he takes to spin back and grin at Shen Yuan gets him taken out as well.

Overall, though, Luo Binghe seems to be pleased with the idea of Shen Yuan and himself being part of a special team with roles that benefit one another. They still don't perform very well - it's clear that the other people playing on both their team and the enemy team have done this sort of thing before, which is unfortunately hard to keep up with - but every time they get sent out of active play Luo Binghe only looks more excited.

Shen Yuan makes sure to make a show of complaining about all of Luo Binghe's plans, of course. He can't be seen to have *too* much fun when Luo Binghe is directing them both around like little toy soldiers.

Still, though, by the end of their reserved match time, Shen Yuan can't find it in himself to be too irritated by how dirty and out of breath he is.

"Next time," Luo Binghe says as they're removing their gear, "We'll win every match."

"Oh yeah?" Shen Yuan says, trying to keep the grin off his face. "Look how many times you got hit, can you really say that when you look like a clown exploded on you?"

“Yuan-ge didn’t get hit as much,” Luo Binghe counters, looking quite pleased with himself as he looks Shen Yuan up and down. “Which is only thanks to my planning and direction. Maybe it’s Yuan-ge who needs to improve his aim, so he doesn’t let me get shot so much.”

“Ah? Who are you to talk about poor aim? Maybe you just need to come up with plans that don’t involve using yourself as bait, hm?” Shen Yuan tosses his goggles at Luo Binghe, generally trying to be a bit of a nuisance, and Luo Binghe catches them easily.

Instead of setting them aside with his own discarded gear, though, Luo Binghe steps closer into Shen Yuan’s space. When he’s this close, Shen Yuan has to crane his neck up a bit to meet Luo Binghe’s eyes, and Luo Binghe very helpfully leans down a bit. Their noses are nearly touching; Shen Yuan can feel Luo Binghe’s breath fan out against his skin.

He swallows thickly, suddenly much more uncomfortable with how sweaty he is from running around than he had been a moment ago.

“We made a good team, though, right?” Luo Binghe asks, his eyes bright.

Fuck. Fuck!! That’s so cute, what the fuck!!

“Mm,” Shen Yuan says nonchalantly. “For a couple of noobs, we did alright.”

“Good,” Luo Binghe says, and then he leans back and shoves Shen Yuan’s goggles back at him. “Then it’s like I said - we’ll win next time. Teach me how to be better at the shooting video games; I can be a better ranged fighter.”

“As if something like this is anything like a video game,” Shen Yuan protests, but his voice sounds a bit weak to his own ears.

Luo Binghe looks down at him expectantly. He still has his hand on the goggles, even though Shen Yuan had brought his own hand up to take them from him.

“...I’ll teach you,” Shen Yuan allows after a moment. “Don’t go and be better than me, though - leave your Yuan-ge something to brag about, ah…”

“Yuan-ge can still beat me in Mario’s Karts,” Luo Binghe says as he finally drops his hand from the goggles, grinning sharply. “If you want to keep beating me in other things, then you’ll just have to keep showing me new things, too.”

“I don’t mind that,” Shen Yuan says, and he finds that he really doesn’t.

Luo Binghe steps back fully, grinning toothily as they both finish taking off their gear and stacking them into piles to be brought back to the rental counter.

Then Luo Binghe pulls out the paper directions he’d printed this morning, and Shen Yuan finally feels the weird, electric moment between them break as he bursts out laughing at the state of them.

“You - *hah!* - where the hell were you keeping those that they got that fucked up?” He laughs.

Luo Binghe scowls, holding out the crumpled and paint-splattered papers away from himself. “I didn’t mean to,” he grumbles.

“Of course not,” Shen Yuan snickers. “It’s fine, it’s fine - *I’m* not a middle aged man who doesn’t know how to use tech on the go. Go take our gear back to the counter, I’ll pull up directions to get us home.”

Luo Binghe huffs but obediently gathers up their gear to take back to the counter, and Shen Yuan watches him for a moment to make sure he won’t terrorize the employee before pulling out his phone to open up his maps app -

- and then promptly remembers that he had silenced his phone at the start of this day for a very good reason.

Shen Yuan winces at the sight of his notifications: four missed calls from his Er-ge and a text from his Da-ge telling him to pick up. Tch, as if his Er-ge wasn’t perfectly capable of sending a text himself!

Grumbling, Shen Yuan goes to do just that, writing up a simple *‘what’s wrong why are u calling me’* text to his Er-ge and very much *not* calling him back. Look! Texting! Easy and preferable to an actual call!

Of course, it’s only moments after his text is marked as delivered that he gets another call.

“Oh, damn it -” Shen Yuan mutters before answering the call. Luo Binghe has just finished returning the gear and is starting to walk back, too, and Shen Yuan sends him a silent gesture of apology as he brings the phone up to his ear. “Er-ge, I’m out with a friend right now, what is it?”

“Since when did you get a friend?” Comes the response from the other side of the line. Shen Yuan wrinkles up his nose in distaste. *“Certainly, this isn’t another small actor you’ve bribed to meet up with only to leave stranded?”*

“Wha - they weren’t stranded!” Shen Yuan protests, and then immediately winces. “I mean -”

“Too late. Besides, even if you had tried to deny it, I have pictures.”

Beside him, Luo Binghe finishes the trek back to Shen Yuan’s side and leans into his space again. He is very clearly trying to listen in on Shen Yuan’s phone call to figure out why he’s been delayed.

“Why do you have pictures,” Shen Yuan groans, pushing Luo Binghe’s face out of the way. “What ever happened to privacy, ah? Who even took pictures of us!”

“I got them from the security cameras myself,” his brother says. Beside him, Luo Binghe goes stiff - an understandable response to hearing that some rando got his hands on private security camera footage! *“If you’re asking who the snitch, was, though - that Xiang Jiayi’s agent sent Mom an email.”*

Shen Yuan clicks his tongue. “Maybe if he’d gotten his talent to do his *job* -”

“Oh? Yuan-er was unhappy with that meeting, even after he was the one who arranged it and then abandoned it?”

“I still paid them,” he whines. “Er-ge wasn’t there, you don’t know how rude they were - leaving while everyone was still on good terms was the best option!”

“Everyone?” His brother asks sharply. *“Including the pest you arranged that little brunch for to begin with?”*

“Haha,” Shen Yuan says. “Look at that, time to go. Talk to you later!”

Shen Yuan hangs up before he can hear the response, though he can imagine it well enough. He groans, bringing a hand up to run over his face.

“Well, that could have been worse,” he says, sighing. “I’ll probably even have enough time to say goodbye to my loved ones before he hires a hitman to take me out for hanging up on him.”

When Luo Binghe doesn’t say anything in response, though, Shen Yuan peaks out from between his fingers to glare up at him.

“This is where you give me your condolences, Binghe - or, better yet, swear to protect me with your dying breath.”

“From who?” Luo Binghe asks, his voice a bit odd. Shen Yuan drops his hand from his face to blink up at him.

He’s staring at Shen Yuan’s phone, held limply in his other hand. Shen Jiu’s caller ID is still sitting on the screen - along with his contact picture of Shen Jiu giving the camera his middle finger - and Shen Yuan dismisses it before putting his phone away.

“My Er-ge,” he sighs. “The one I *told* you would be calling today, ah, I just knew it! I don’t know if he got wind of our coffee-based mischief this morning yet, but he is very well aware of the brunch in general, and he is as unhappy about it as I expected.”

“From *who,”* Luo Binghe repeats, harder this time. “Who, exactly, is Shen Yuan’s brother?”

Shen Yuan frowns up at him. “What happened to calling me ‘Yuan-ge,’ ah, I was getting used to it!”

“The name of your brother,” Luo Binghe hisses, and Shen Yuan takes an involuntary step back, startled.

“Shen Jiu,” he says slowly, looking at Luo Binghe more carefully now. His expression is shuttered, but his eyes are burning with an anger that Shen Yuan has not seen from Luo Binghe in over a month, now. “Binghe, are you okay?”

Luo Binghe does not snap at him, or bare his teeth, or growl. His mouth presses together in a tight, unhappy line, and his hands curl into fists at his sides.

Somehow, despite only being minutes apart, there is nothing in his expression that reminds Shen Yuan of the Luo Binghe who had so cutely been excited at the thought of having a teammate, or who had been so thrilled to play-fight with guns and colorful paint.

Shen Yuan takes a hesitant step forward, his brows furrowed. “Binghe, don’t do anything rash, okay? My Er-ge can be a bit unreasonable, but even if he’s upset, it won’t be so bad.”

“Don’t do anything rash?” Luo Binghe asks, incredulous. He barks out a harsh laugh. “Tell me, Shen Yuan, why do you think it isn’t so bad?”

“It - I mean, it was worth it, don’t you think?” Shen Yuan asks, watching Luo Binghe carefully. “Even if it my Er-ge will chew us out, meeting those rude actors made you realize that there’s plenty of fish in the sea besides your old ‘Shizun’ -”

“My *Shizun* -!” Luo Binghe roars, but then cuts himself off. His mouth shuts with an audible *click.* His hands are shaking, just slightly, but they do not move from where they are balled up at his sides.

“...Binghe?”

“Don’t call me so familiarly,” Luo Binghe snaps, and Shen Yuan flinches back, a bit hurt. “Don’t - don’t call me your friend, or your stupid fake lover, or -”

“Binghe, what’s going on?” Shen Yuan asks, starting to feel a bit panicked. “Do you know my Er-ge from somewhere?”

Luo Binghe laughs. It is not a kind laugh, and he does not look particularly amused. If he didn’t look so angry, Shen Yuan might think he was about to cry.

“I can’t believe you,” Luo Binghe says. “I really thought -”

He cuts himself off again. He looks at Shen Yuan’s face searchingly, but whatever expression he finds there doesn’t satisfy him.

“It doesn’t matter what I thought.” Luo Binghe’s expression, which had been so carefully closed off until now, turns cruel. “Manipulating me this whole time, lying to me every step of the way, making me feel so - *so* -” Luo Binghe struggles with his words, finally spitting out, “How *fitting* for a Shen.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Shen Yuan asks desperately.

“I told you,” Luo Binghe hisses, “I told you that I would recognize him - that I would only need one look. You must be so disappointed that I was right.”

“Recognize - what? Wait, this - you think my *Er-ge* is your -”

“Don’t play dumb with me anymore,” Luo Binghe snarls. “You - you really had me fooled, Shen Yuan, but I won’t - I should kill you for -”

Shen Yuan takes another step back. His heart is beating jack-rabbit fast, now, and he doesn't know what's going on, or what to do, or if he should say anything else.

Luo Binghe stops in his tracks. He'd raised one arm when he'd started to threaten Shen Yuan, but as soon as Shen Yuan had flinched backwards, he'd frozen. There's a long moment of nothing but the sound of breathing between them - Luo Binghe's ragged and furious, Shen Yuan's shallow and quick - and Shen Yuan knows he should run or get help or *something,* but he cannot move from where he is standing.

Luo Binghe only drops his hand, though, some of the anger melting off his face into a helplessness that makes Shen Yuan's chest ache.

"I wish you'd had the decency to keep me fooled the whole time," Luo Binghe says, voice quiet. "Only slipping up now, after I've - after I'd started to think -"

Luo Binghe's throat bobs. He is still watching Shen Yuan's expression, searching for something. Shen Yuan watches him back, afraid for himself and Luo Binghe and - and his Er-ge, too, *fuck* -

"Don't show your face to me again," Luo Binghe finally says, voice cold.

Shen Yuan flinches back again, somehow still surprised even after Luo Binghe had been threatening him, and in that moment -

Luo Binghe turns and runs away.

Chapter End Notes

teehee :)

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe has a very, very bad evening.

Chapter Notes

please note that the rating for this fic has gone up specifically for this chapter - nothing crazy, but bingge is bingge and has some very harsh ways of thinking about the world.

also, ty to mo (and mo's very helpful cat) for reading this over to make sure it all made sense! one day i'm going to be more confident in my binghe POVs😔🙏

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe does not know the way home. Shen Yuan's world is crowded and sprawling and has little to no natural qi flow, and navigating the cities feels like walking blind through an unfinished dream.

Perhaps more damning than that, Luo Binghe has grown complacent. Knowing that he hasn't faced danger in any real way since coming to this world, knowing that this world is full of technology that holds libraries of information about location and history and culture, knowing that Shen Yuan could guide him anywhere - knowing he didn't have to memorize the layout of this city, he never did.

He does not know the way home, so he does not know how to avoid it.

He ends up ducking into an alleyway several long blocks away from the paintball facility. He ran there faster than Shen Yuan would be capable of keeping up with, and he chose an alley small and damp and foul enough that hopefully Shen Yuan would not think to look for him in it.

He has not hid like this in many, many years.

It's been even longer since the last time he'd felt this betrayed.

What a fucking *fool* he'd been. Shen Yuan had shown him two miserable, boring little men, and Luo Binghe had just taken him at his word when he'd said those were the only possibilities for who his Shizun could be in this world. Shen Yuan, *Shen* Yuan, who had told

him right from the start that he had some idea of who his Shizun was, and then who failed to bring anyone even remotely similar to Shen Qingqiu forward.

What, he thought Shen Yuan was a bit cute? Thought he was harmless, that he was nice - who fucking cares if someone's *nice?* Luo Binghe never should have taken him at his word to begin with. He never should have put his search for Shen Qingqiu in the hands of another, never should have trusted anyone with this no matter how earnest they were.

But what clue did he have to Shen Yuan's disloyalty? The way he surrounded himself with icons of Luo Binghe himself, so clearly a fan of the bastardized rendition of Luo Binghe's own life that existed on this world's internet? Shen Yuan's obvious attraction to him, his leniency even when he became irritated with the liberties Luo Binghe took with him? The worst Shen Yuan ever did to him was scold him, but even that was -

It -

Luo Binghe swallows thickly. He thinks about Shen Yuan's hand in his hair - petting him, cuffing him over the head, ruffling his hair.

It had been awhile since Shen Yuan's "scolding" had been anything of the sort. Shen Yuan nitpicked and fussed and made a great show of being displeased, but he still returned Luo Binghe's grins and helped him with the dishes and called him his friend. He scolded Luo Binghe like an old woman, hiding concern under disapproval; Luo Binghe's ideas of revenge were called nonsensical and terrible, but the alternative was "do it this way to not get caught" instead of "don't do it at all."

Once, what feels like a lifetime ago, Sha Hualing had called herself Luo Binghe's partner in crime. Luo Binghe had thought the term cute, indulged her by fucking her next to the corpse of the man he'd killed for her, and promptly forgot about it.

Now, Luo Binghe thinks he'd sneer at her if she tried to say the same thing. A partner? Her? A woman who whined and threw violent fits but only when she knew it would be tolerated? A woman who was quick to raise a hand against her maid servants and sisters in the harem, but would never act as such to Luo Binghe himself unless out of foreplay? A woman who, at the end of the day, was motivated primarily by the desire to curry favor and power for herself?

When compared to someone like Shen Yuan, who was pleased to teach Luo Binghe things both foolish and useful even when there was no obvious benefit to himself, and who was quick to tell Luo Binghe when he was wrong but would always silently hold out a way to fix it - yes, that was what a partner should be.

That was what a partner should be, but not before the principal issues of honesty and loyalty.

Luo Binghe's palms ache slightly from how tightly his fists are clenched, pressing his nails deeply into the skin of his hand. His feet ache, too - the concrete and asphalt that layers the city ground is not nearly as forgiving to run on as the packed dirt of the paintball facility had been. The dull pain makes everything feel even more disorientating and wrong, making it difficult to recenter himself so he can start figuring out what to do next.

His palms should not sting from the press of his nails. His feet should not ache. Those sensations sit alongside the feeling of betrayal as things that he has not experienced since his miserable mockery of a discipleship on Qing Jing so many years ago - not since the cradle seal on his demonic blood had released. He's felt pain and discomfort since then, of course, but only notably for times when he's been mauled or gutted or lost a limb or the particularly memorable time a foolish lord had snuck a corrosive acid into his drink.

Not for the mundane aches of everyday life; not for things his blood and body should be able to withstand without complaint, healing damaged cells before his nerves can even process their loss.

Had the loss of his cultivation and demonic abilities also been caused by Shen Yuan, after all? Luo Binghe had pinned the blame on him when he had first arrived in this world, but…

No. Not that, too.

Shen Yuan had always been so flippant when the topic of Luo Binghe's lost powers came up, after all, as if he didn't quite believe him. That wasn't the attitude he would have had if he were in on that scheme.

Luo Binghe is more inclined to believe that it is simply the nature of this world suppressing his abilities, their presence not able to be compressed into such a qi-strangled place. Perhaps that is why Luo Binghe kept his demonic huadian and sharp teeth - things that could exist in this world as generic body modifications - while some of his more subtle but actively functional demonic traits like his night vision disappeared. Some things could realistically be mapped to a human's body, and others couldn't, so he lost the ones that would push against the fabric of this world's reality.

He takes a deep, stuttering breath in. He is relieved to find that he believes so firmly that Shen Yuan had no hand in whatever force had taken all of Luo Binghe and shoved him into a mortal body, but he is just as furious that he feels that relief at all. He should not feel this strongly attached to someone he *knows* has betrayed him.

Shen Yuan had told him that he knew where and how to find his Shizun. He'd stated clearly that Shen Qingqiu would not be a member of his Shen family, only someone associated with their trade. Then he'd shown Luo Binghe two people who could not possibly be any version of Shen Qingqiu, had told him there were no more possibilities, and had encouraged him to give up the search. He'd given Luo Binghe reason to believe it might even be *good* to stop searching for Shen Qingqiu.

Only after Luo Binghe had believed him - after Luo Binghe had given up on searching for Shen Qingqiu in this world - had Shen Yuan let it slip that he'd had Shen Qingqiu hidden close to him this whole time. Not just as an acquaintance or peer or any other sort of casual relationship either - Shen Yuan had been *brothers* with Shen Qingqiu this *whole time* -

For that to all be a coincidence…

No. Luo Binghe has learned over years of hardship that there are no coincidences. If someone smiles especially sweetly at him, and then the drink they hand him is poisoned, it was their

hand that put the poison in there and no one else's. If someone claims to have never heard of a precious treasure, and then that same treasure is discovered under the floorboards of their chambers, they had hidden it there themselves.

No one in any world has ever inflicted cruelty upon Luo Binghe without it being intentional, no one has ever betrayed him by *accident.* Life has made it painfully clear that Luo Binghe's suffering must all be by design.

There is no way that Shen Yuan had not known who his brother was to Luo Binghe. Not with the active efforts he'd made to turn Luo Binghe's attention to anyone *but* Shen Qingqiu.

Had Shen Yuan meant to offer himself as a replacement to keep Luo Binghe's eyes from wandering? Or had Shen Yuan only meant to be good enough to gain Luo Binghe's trust so he could advise Luo Binghe to give up, and Luo Binghe had foolishly given more of himself than Shen Yuan had even been looking for?

Idly, Luo Binghe wonders what would have happened if he had never found out. If Luo Binghe had not returned to Shen Yuan's side so quickly and the phone call had already been over, or if Luo Binghe had not been able to recognize Shen Qingqiu's voice over the phone, or if he had not looked at Shen Yuan's phone screen and seen the image of Shen Qingqiu himself on the caller ID.

Would Shen Yuan have kept Luo Binghe forever? Would he have helped Luo Binghe sign up for local sports teams and gone to his matches and scolded Luo Binghe for bragging when he won? Would he have continued to share his hobbies with Luo Binghe and encourage him to play with the carelessness of a child, as if there was nothing in this world that could hurt him in any of the ways Luo Binghe had grown to guard against in his own world? Would he, someday, let Luo Binghe - to him -

Luo Binghe shakes the thought away. It feels like a violent act, forcefully discarding such a warm thought of the future.

Perhaps if he had never learned of Shen Jiu, Shen Yuan would have kept Luo Binghe forever. Shen Yuan's attraction to Luo Binghe aside, it would have been a convenient way to monitor him for any continued efforts to find Shen Qingqiu.

But Luo Binghe found out. It is useless to speculate otherwise.

Luo Binghe takes another long breath in, steeling himself. He cannot stand in this alleyway forever. He needs to find Shen Jiu quickly; Shen Yuan is likely to have already alerted him to Luo Binghe's discovery. If he wants to find Shen Jiu with minimal hassle, sooner is better than later.

As for what he'll do when he finds him…

Luo Binghe does not want to take Shen Qingqiu as a husband anymore. Despite everything else, he stands by the resolution he'd come to in the bathroom of the brunch place Shen Yuan had taken him to: it doesn't have to be Shen Qingqiu. He can find anyone else, so long as

they are good to him and love him in the same way he'd seen those doppelgangers from his mirror world love each other.

(So long as they are like Shen Yuan, he thinks, even though he is supposed to be looking for someone like the kind Shen Qingqiu he met in that other world.

But he has known Shen Yuan for far longer than he had met that mirror Shen Qingqiu for, and Luo Binghe is not unaffected by the time he spent at Shen Yuan's side. Although he still wants someone who will scold him and fuss over him and know him so intimately that they could pick him out from his own doppelganger, his list of demands has grown.

He wants someone who will play with him too, someone who will like the ways that Luo Binghe finds himself to be sharper and less human than the way that crybaby who had shared his face had presented himself as. *So long as they are like Shen Yuan…*

Ah, how truly cruel it is that both of the men that have unintentionally raised Luo Binghe's standards have been out of his reach.)

So no, Luo Binghe does not want to find Shen Jiu to marry him. He doesn't want to think about marrying any Shen ever again; they're all destined to betray Luo Binghe in the end.

But still, Luo Binghe must find Shen Jiu. It wasn't just in the pursuit of a husband that Luo Binghe had first come to this world, after all.

If all Luo Binghe wanted was someone to treat him in the same way that Shen Qingqiu had, he could've stayed in his own world. He could've taken any man and simply trained them to love him right. He could've taught them to see him as an equal and someone to fuss over. He could've taught them to say the right things and play the right ways, and he could've tested them until they could prove they would be able to identify Luo Binghe himself from an entire field of imposters - that they knew Luo Binghe's very soul and not just his body and power.

No, it wasn't just the way Luo Binghe had been treated by Shen Qingqiu that had rocked him to his core; it was that it was from Shen Qingqiu specifically.

A man that Luo Binghe had spent years trying to please, at a time in his life when he was worthy of less of the resentment he'd perhaps rightfully cultivated over his years as emperor. A man that Luo Binghe had never seen be so soft to *anyone* - that was the man that Luo Binghe's own doppelganger had managed to spin like soft sugar around his fingers.

That other mirror Luo Binghe had to have done something to have caused the change in Shen Qingqiu's feelings - he had to have been better in some way. Perhaps he had been more skilled, or perhaps he'd found Meng Mo before Shen Qingqiu's qi deviation and had used his budding dream manipulation skills to break something in Shen Qingqiu's mind to make him softer.

Knowing that there was a way Luo Binghe could've been better - could've been spared so much suffering - had lit a hot stone of indignation in his gut. What was it? In what way was he failing?

He couldn't find that answer in his own world, which contained a Shen Qingqiu that had been so irreparably broken by Luo Binghe during years of slow cooked revenge. That was the true core of why he had hopped worlds like he had: not to find a Shen Qingqiu to love him in just the right way, but to find out *how* to make a Shen Qingqiu love him as such.

And then…

And then Shen Yuan had been better than he'd expected, he supposed.

Since meeting him, some of the tightness in Luo Binghe's chest and the anxious energy in his core had settled. It made Luo Binghe feel more level headed, made him feel less like he'd go stir crazy if he went a single day without winning or fucking or figuring out how to be better. And day by day, Luo Binghe could feel the burning drive that had originally brought him to this world cool until it no longer pressed his every thought into a jumbled mess of *why?* and *how?* and *wasn't I already great?*

Some of that, he knew, was a result of Xin Mo being sealed from Luo Binghe so thoroughly that he could no longer even sense the sword's presence. And yet it was undeniable that Shen Yuan himself played a major role in calming Luo Binghe, too.

After all, wasn't Shen Yuan almost exactly like the sort of person Luo Binghe would've trained a husband to be for him? Even Shen Yuan's quirks - his prudishness and his crass language and his lack of immortal gracefulness - even those things, over time, seemed to become a bit cute. And if someone could treat Luo Binghe just the way he wanted most of all without ever having been taught to… well, didn't that mean that there was nothing wrong with Luo Binghe after all?

Perhaps what had been wrong with Luo Binghe had been fixed for decades now - during his rise to power, perhaps, or while he was in bed learning types of affection that didn't have to be rooted in real love - and it was only that his doppelganger had figured it out sooner than Luo Binghe and so had been able to impress Shen Qingqiu with it. Perhaps nothing had been wrong to begin with, and Shen Qingqiu had been the defective one rather than Luo Binghe.

If that was the case, then Luo Binghe had nothing to search for anymore. He could simply focus on the other half of his convictions - on the love itself, rather than who it came from or why.

And if he no longer needed it to come from a specific person - if he no longer needed to prove anything - wasn't it alright to sink more comfortably into the opportunity that Shen Yuan himself presented?

But Shen Yuan had betrayed him.

Shen Yuan had given every indication that he liked Luo Binghe, and yet still he had lied to him about the one thing that Luo Binghe had made clear as his singular motivation for coming to this world, the one thing that Shen Yuan *knew* meant so much to him.

So Luo Binghe had been wrong. It was him after all, and whatever was wrong about him hadn't been fixed yet. This is the second time that he's found someone who has the potential

to love him as an equal, and the second time that person has instead chosen to lie and betray him. If that isn't proof, what is?

So he needs to find this world's Shen Qingqiu after all, and he needs to use him to find out what about him inspires cruelty in others. He needs to find Shen Jiu, and -

Luo Binghe pauses from where he'd moved to start exiting the alleyway. To find Shen Jiu… well, he has a first and last name now, and knowledge of what family he belongs to. Luo Binghe had found many interesting things on this world's internet, and he could likely deduce Shen Jiu's place of work or general home location from it as well.

That would require access to the internet to begin with, though.

Luo Binghe knows there are places where he can pay to use the internet, but he has no method of payment. Even if he found someone willing to accept gold or gems instead of digital payment, he can't actually reach the funds he had tucked away in his qiankun robes before coming to this world. The robes themselves are still in his room in Shen Yuan's apartment, and Luo Binghe hasn't been able to access any of his qiankun spaces since he lost access to his cultivation anyway.

He could convince someone to allow him to use their phone, he supposes. He's grown familiar with the general standards for modesty and flirting in this world thanks to Shen Yuan - it wouldn't be an unfamiliar process to find someone who has what he wants and graciously convince them to give it to him in exchange for some honeyed words or a fun night.

…Oddly, Luo Binghe feels a bit sick. It feels like he's been in this world much longer than he really has been, with how separate he feels from an action he would have taken - *has* taken - so many times in his past.

Fine, then. Luo Binghe's instincts have always been right: if his gut turns at the thought of sweetly convincing a passerby to let him into their home to use their computer or whatever, it must be for good reason.

Unfortunately, Luo Binghe's other instinctual thought is to have Shen Yuan help him.

Stupid. He doesn't have any reason to trust that man anymore. Yet…

Well. Shen Yuan owes him, he supposes, both for the betrayal and for the time and emotions that Luo Binghe wasted on him. If Luo Binghe were to take advantage of Shen Yuan's resources without Shen Yuan's direct involvement…

Yes, Luo Binghe will do that. No need to find anyone else; Shen Yuan will do just fine, even if his assistance isn't voluntary.

Luo Binghe spends several long hours searching the surrounding city blocks for any sort of landmark he may be able to use to guide himself back to Shen Yuan's apartment building.

Walking feels better than hiding still and silent in an alleyway, and step by step Luo Binghe can feel parts of himself settle back into place.

Outside of the immediate whiplash of discovering Shen Yuan's betrayal, the city feels quieter than Luo Binghe is used to. The city traffic is still too busy and there are still many bars playing music loudly enough it spills onto the streets, but all the conversations around Luo Binghe are indistinct; he isn't involved in them, and he has no conversation partner of his own. With a goal in mind and his energy tempered by movement, his own thoughts are quieter too, so he does not have them to fill the silence.

By the time he's managed to find his way - first recognizing a subway stop, and then a grocery store, and then finally making his way to Shen Yuan's apartment building - he no longer burns the way he had in that alleyway. It makes it more bearable to stand and wait outside of the apartment building. He stands and stares motionlessly as night falls and the neon lights of the city flicker on one by one, and then he stands and waits some more.

Shen Yuan had always been terrible about going to bed at a healthy time, after all.

When he's sure Shen Yuan will be asleep, Luo Binghe enters the building. There's no card required for the elevator; the only lock is on Shen Yuan's apartment itself.

It is not difficult to break.

The apartment is quiet and mostly dark, though Shen Yuan had left the entryway light on. Luo Binghe hesitates there in the entryway for only a moment before moving deeper into the apartment. He starts with his own room - it would be foolish not to collect his own belongings while he's already here. The fanny packs, a few shirts, a knife that Shen Yuan had failed to confiscate from him.

He has every right to take these things with him. He should not feel bad. It is only the quiet of the apartment that unsettles him, makes him feel like he is still standing motionlessly outside of the building.

He goes to the kitchen, next - he isn't sure when the next time is that he'll be able to purchase anything in this world, and the cities here don't seem to contain much in the way of game that Luo Binghe could hunt for his meals. He should take the meat Shen Yuan had bought the last time they were at the grocery store; Shen Yuan wouldn't know how to prepare it by himself anyway.

Luo Binghe pauses in front of the refrigerator. In the low light spilling into the kitchen from the entryway, the Reward Board is illuminated just enough so that Luo Binghe can see it. The star magnets that had been on the "good" side have all been shoved to the "bad" one. They're placed haphazardly, the neat little rows Luo Binghe had placed them in now disrupted by what had clearly been an impulsive, uncoordinated motion to just shove all of the good ones away as fast as possible.

Shen Yuan has no right to decide what things about Luo Binghe are good or bad. He never had the right to begin with - Luo Binghe had learned a long time ago that he had to define for himself what "good" meant or else he'd never be it.

Luo Binghe had wanted to be liked, though. He'd wanted to know how to be liked by Shen Qingqiu, and later had just wanted to be liked by Shen Yuan himself.

Luo Binghe turns away without taking the meat from the fridge, and the quiet of the apartment somehow feels more suffocating than before.

Shen Yuan's door to his room is closed, but Luo Binghe knows he keeps his phone next to his bed when he sleeps. He cannot take the laptop sitting out in the living room instead; he knows it won't be able to access the internet once it's removed from this apartment. He must go into Shen Yuan's room and retrieve the phone.

He slips into Shen Yuan's room silently. It isn't an issue. He'd entered this room while Shen Yuan was sleeping in the past, too, and Shen Yuan did not wake up. Nothing will be different this time.

The room smells more strongly like Shen Yuan than the rest of the apartment. Shen Yuan himself is twisted up in his sheets. He does not wake when Luo Binghe approaches. Good - that was what Luo Binghe wanted, after all. He wanted Shen Yuan to sleep through the entire time that Luo Binghe was in his apartment. It would be bad if Shen Yuan woke up.

Luo Binghe takes Shen Yuan's phone from his nightstand. Shen Yuan does not stir.

Luo Binghe swallows thickly. He catches himself watching Shen Yuan, tracing the shape of his face with his eyes. He really doesn't look much alike to Shen Qingqiu, even though he's Shen Jiu's brother. His face is rounder and his nose is smaller, and though his eyes may be a bit sharp, they're set under thicker eyebrows and longer lashes. Their strongest similarity really is just their name.

Still, Luo Binghe feels like a fool for not having figured out Shen Yuan's close relationship to Shen Qingqiu sooner.

With any luck, this will be the last time Luo Binghe sees Shen Yuan. He leaves the robes he'd been wearing when he arrived to this world on Shen Yuan's nightstand in place of the phone - even if the gems and metals in his inaccessible qiankun sleeves couldn't be counted, the silk and the expensive ornaments from his belt and hair crown should still be enough to settle any remaining debts between them.

Luo Binghe looks at Shen Yuan one last time. He does not wake up. The apartment is still quiet and motionless outside of Luo Binghe's own breathing.

Good. That was what Luo Binghe wanted, after all.

Luo Binghe leaves quicker than he arrived, turning off the entryway light as he goes. He feels both restless and like he's seeing the world through a layer of slow molasses, and he takes the stairs down the building instead of the elevator in the hopes that the movement will burn away some of this uneasy energy.

Shen Yuan had betrayed him. Luo Binghe will shake these unwanted feelings soon enough.

(Luo Binghe knows that in the mirror world he'd visited, the kind Shen Qingqiu had once betrayed his Luo Binghe. He knows that other Luo Binghe had not shaken *his* feelings, and that after he'd crawled out from the abyss he'd hunted his Shen Qingqiu down and made him take responsibility.

Luo Binghe is not as soft or sweet of a person as that other version of himself, though. He bites where that other Luo Binghe wouldn't; he will be able to forget about this person who betrayed him even if that other Luo Binghe couldn't.)

He doesn't bother running from the apartment once he's left it; Shen Yuan won't wake for several long hours yet. Instead he sits on one of the benches outside, his collection of belongings beside him, and takes out Shen Yuan's phone. Luo Binghe has long since absently memorized and tucked away the passcode for it; he opens it without struggle.

Once it's open, though, Luo Binghe pauses. The phone had been left open on Shen Yuan's chat history with Shen Jiu - Shen Yuan must have been messaging him right before he went to bed. Luo Binghe takes a steadying breath in and scrolls up until he reaches the marker indicating the start of today's text history between the two of them.

hey uh btw if u see a guy w a forehead tattoo lmk<
also just try to avoid him<
or tell him to fuck off<
or something<

> And who, exactly, are you acquainted with that has a forehead tattoo?

none of your business that's who<

> I'm calling Mom

DONT DO THAT YOU FUCK<
hes fine i dont think he's part of a gang or anything<

> "Think"
> Is this the same pest you had those small talents meet?

no<
maybe<
he's looking for someone he used to know<

> Stop trying to help every wet dog you find outside Yuan-er

i didn't say i was helping him<

> It would have been more incriminating if you tried to say you weren't trying to help him, actually

why do u hate me we shared a womb<

> Don't be crass. Also, you came after me - that isn't sharing, that's giving you my hand-me-downs.

"dont be crass yuan-er also let me talk about giving u our mothers womb like it was an old backpack i was done with"<
dumbass<

> Are you going to tell me about your gangster parasite or not?

definitely 'or not'<
and hes not a gangster<
he's a nerd<

> That isn't reassuring the way you think it might be, Yuan-er

IM a nerd u like me<

> Just tell me if I'm supposed to call the cops if I see him or not
> I'll get Meimei to get the rest of the details out of you later so I know whether to press charges against him for extorting my dumb little brother
> Yuan-er you've been typing for the last five minutes it was a yes or no question

idk<

> It took you five minutes to type 'idk'? Weren't you supposed to be the computer literate one?

fuck off<
last time i saw him he was just rly freaking out<
cops would not help him stop freaking out<

> Cops would cause any criminal to freak out

hes not a criminal<
ok well he hasnt done anything super criminal like, where i could see it<

> I'm going to call the cops if I see him.

I DIDNT FINISH FUCK OFF<

> If you take several minutes to type a message I'm going to use that time to come to whatever conclusions I see fit

hes like a feral cat that was THIS close to letting someone catch n neuter him and then decided hed be better off alone in the rain<
hes mean sometimes but idk if he like<
wants to be<
idk this sounds kinda stupid even to me forget it<
he's an asshole do what u want<

> Why do you always attract the worst type of men

cuz im especially cool and handsome and everyone wants to be my friend<
unlike u<

> You wish
> So you want me to let you know if I see your tattooed wet feral cat boyfriend but not approach him because he may or may not be a criminal
> That's really what you're going with as a convincing argument

please?<

> 'Please' won't stop someone from getting stabbed

if he spots you first and approaches on his own then u can say or do whatever u want<
he'll probably have it coming<
but if you manage to see him without him seeing you also…<

> I'll say or do whatever I want anyway
> But fine. I'll let you know if I see your lost pet
> I AM calling Mom though

fuck u we're both adults<
but fine whatever<
thank you<

> We're both adults who can recognize that Mom's lawyers are better than anyone we could find on our own
> You're welcome.

The conversation stops there. Luo Binghe finishes reading it and then immediately scrolls back to the top to read it again, Shen Yuan's phone held tight in his hands.

This…

Shen Jiu clearly doesn't know about his own connection to Luo Binghe. He might not know *anything* about Luo Binghe, outside of that he's been living with Shen Yuan for some time. If Shen Jiu knew who Luo Binghe was - knew the story of his life the way that Shen Yuan does - Shen Yuan would have just called him by name. He could have even just said "if you see a demon," instead of "someone with a tattoo on their forehead."

If Shen Jiu isn't aware of Luo Binghe in any meaningful way, that means he had no part in Shen Yuan's efforts to keep him hidden as the Shen Qingqiu of this world. Shen Yuan clearly hadn't even *told* Shen Jiu about Luo Binghe's search, based on this conversation.

Could Shen Yuan - that is, is it possible -

Luo Binghe's eye catches on Shen Jiu's profile picture, and the flickering feeling of almost-hope snuffs out instantly.

Shen Yuan had recognized Luo Binghe right away, back when they'd first met. Even though he'd never seen Luo Binghe before, Shen Yuan had known who he was on sight - presumably from the story on the internet about Luo Binghe's life.

Luo Binghe never quite figured out how to feel about that story existing - he's long grown desensitized to bards and performers giving overblown recounts of his life, but none so detailed nor crass, and certainly nothing that stretched so far back into Luo Binghe's past. Luo Binghe had wondered, when he'd first found it, if it had been the result of a seer's divination reaching across worlds.

Regardless, the story existed, and Shen Yuan had clearly read it and had known to recognize Luo Binghe himself from it. The art Luo Binghe had seen in the margins of that story was stylized, but it *did* look enough like Luo Binghe that he could recognize it as himself.

The art of Shen Qingqiu - although there was less of it - was the same way. If Shen Yuan could recognize Luo Binghe, he should also be able to recognize his own brother as Shen Qingqiu. Their faces are nearly identical, after all, with the only differences being that Shen Jiu wears his hair shorter and has a healthier flush to his face than Shen Qingqiu had ever had.

It's clear from this text conversation that Shen Jiu does not know who Luo Binghe is, nor that Luo Binghe is looking for him, nor even that Shen Yuan had been carefully keeping that search fruitless.

And yet even if Shen Jiu does not know, Shen Yuan himself must have. He *must* have lied to Luo Binghe knowingly, he must have known who his brother was - must have recognized Shen Jiu in the art of Luo Binghe's biography just the same way he recognized Luo Binghe himself. This chat between Shen Yuan and Shen Jiu does not change that, even if it seems to wash Shen Jiu of any blame. Perhaps that even makes it worse, because now Luo Binghe can't even pretend that Shen Yuan had just been put up to it all by his brother.

…Luo Binghe swallows thickly. He rereads the conversation again. Shen Yuan… really doesn't condemn Luo Binghe once in it.

Luo Binghe bows his head, leaning it heavily into his hands. The phone, still clutched tightly between them, digs into his forehead uncomfortably.

Shen Yuan must have known, he thinks again. *He must have known who Shen Jiu was, must have chosen not to show his brother to me purposefully.*

The last time you believed someone had made an honest mistake, they stuck a knife between your ribs when you turned around. No one ever hurts you without it being personal. Shen Yuan must *have known.*

Luo Binghe sits up straight. He needs to meet Shen Jiu. Figuring out what the difference was between himself and his doppelganger is the last thing he will need the Shen family for, and then he can move on.

hey are u still up<
i want noodles<

There's a long moment of tension after Luo Binghe sends the messages. It isn't difficult to mimic the way Shen Yuan types, but there are other risk factors - he doesn't know if the time of night or the request itself will give him away as an imposter.

He has to do it this way, though. Shen Jiu is clearly not as naive as Shen Yuan; if he knew Luo Binghe had stolen Shen Yuan's phone, Luo Binghe would sooner meet some form of security or law enforcement than Shen Jiu himself. He can't wait until morning or spend too much time researching a better way to coax Shen Jiu out, though, since the more time that passes the more likely it is that Shen Jiu will have been informed that Shen Yuan was no longer the one in possession of his own phone.

It turns out there's no cause for concern. Shen Yuan's phone vibrates with a response.

> Have you exhausted your allowance so thoroughly you can no longer afford takeout?
> I'll be over in half an hour

Luo Binghe stands from the bench, then makes himself sit back down. What good would it do him to stand alert like some sort of anxious animal for half an hour?

Luo Binghe stands back up. At the very least, he wants to take his belongings and stash them somewhere else - the mere thought of Shen Qingqiu seeing Luo Binghe laid out next to what amounted to a mere handful of possessions makes his mouth twist bitterly. He won't stoop so low as to stash them somewhere dirty, though, so he ends up backtracking inside the apartment complex to tuck them in an empty mailbox from the set of mail lockers in the lobby.

As he's moving to leave the complex once more, he catches sight of his reflection in the large glass panes of the front door to the lobby. His demonic huadian - his "forehead tattoo," as Shen Jiu had been instructed to be on the lookout for - stands out harshly against his skin.

Luo Binghe sighs harshly, frustrated. He raises a hand up to ruffle through his hair, shuffling the loose curls of his bangs to try and cover the mark. It doesn't quite work; his hair doesn't sit right, so used to being held out of his eyes that it isn't able to conform to a different shape now. He tugs at his bangs roughly, trying to straighten them out to lay down flat over his forehead, but -

But the sting of tugging at his hair hurts, and his curls spring up again anyway, and Luo Binghe just wants - he wants -

What is he doing? Luo Binghe feels a bizarre sense of deja vu, as if he's back in front of the mail lockers from just a moment ago and the mark of his demonic heritage is the last of his belongings that he's shoving away where Shen Jiu can't see it.

He stops, dropping his hand from his hair. He bares his teeth at his own reflection, pale and washed out in the polished glass and artificial lighting. Dressed in clothes of this world, his hair a mess and half covering his demonic huadian, he does not look intimidating. His teeth

glint sharp and deadly, but his nails are mundane and human and weak, and his only accessible weapon is a kitchen knife hidden in a mailbox.

And yet even feeling this powerless and separate from his own power, Luo Binghe knows it won't be enough.

His hair is too long for the men of this world. His demonic mark brands him as some sort of common thug. Even after so long at Shen Yuan's side and his efforts to become more charming by this world's standards, he knows he still slips into linguistic patterns that sound archaic to the people here.

He knows that he cannot let Shen Jiu see his demonic huadian without putting him on edge since Shen Yuan had told his brother to be on the lookout for it. Luo Binghe should find a bandage or makeup to cover it up if his hair won't do. He should cut his hair so it looks normal for this world, and he should be careful not to growl or smile charmingly or do anything else that will show off his teeth. If he lets any of those things go, he'll have ruined the test - Shen Jiu may end up reacting to Luo Binghe's abnormalities according to this world's standards, rather than anything about Luo Binghe himself.

Luo Binghe tugs on his bangs again. Even though such magic doesn't exist in this world, he wonders if he's been cursed or infected with some sort of malicious plant, because his breath is coming too fast and his heart feels like it's been squeezed tight and it feels like there's a beast inside his chest pacing in circles over and over and over again.

If he wants to know what the difference is between himself and that other Luo Binghe, he'll have to remove all other factors. He'll have to hide his demonic traits and cut his hair and talk like a native of this world. He'll have to introduce himself with a fake name; even if Shen Jiu is not familiar with Luo Binghe's story the way that Shen Yuan is, there's every chance that Shen Jiu has heard Shen Yuan mention it.

He'll have to remove every part of himself that belongs to him, and then he'll -

And then what? How could someone judge what is wrong or different about a person if so much of that person is hidden away?

Perhaps Luo Binghe should just give up on this world. He could sneak back into Shen Yuan's apartment and steal his robes back, and he could search this world until he found a qi vein strong enough for him to cultivate off just enough that he could summon Xin Mo once more. He could find a world more similar to his own, one where he wouldn't have to hide so much of himself to get an unbiased result, and he could find an untainted Shen Qingqiu and start the tests over again.

Luo Binghe takes Shen Yuan's phone out again. The restless animal in his chest paces and paces and paces, and Luo Binghe reads the chat history between Shen Yuan and Shen Jiu once more.

By the time he's finished reading, the hot flame of betrayal and indignation and the need to *act* - the flame that had been slowly cooling as Luo Binghe had walked the city looking for

Shen Yuan's apartment building, the flame that had flickered and dwindled as Luo Binghe had snuck through Shen Yuan's room and stolen his things - has gone out entirely.

He still feels betrayed, but it's numb, now. It's like trying to walk through thick mud, every step laborious. Without the burning need to do something, to fix things, to get his deserved prize and retribution - without those things, his mind inevitably spins round and round the chat between Shen Yuan and Shen Jiu.

The creature inside of Luo Binghe pushes at the walls of his chest, restless and desperate, and Luo Binghe slips and lets himself think once more, *Shen Yuan did not condemn me. He did not mention my name to Shen Jiu. He acted, for all intents and purposes, as if he did not quite understand my connection to Shen Jiu, as if he never understood it, as if I, as Luo Binghe, am not a threat to someone I call my Shizun.*

With everything feeling cold and slow, Luo Binghe does not want to see Shen Jiu. He wants his robes back; he wants to dress as himself again and bite and gnaw and never hide ever again.

He wants, just this once, to believe that coincidences are possible, and that someone who hurt him truly did not intend to.

And - and really, what's the harm? Luo Binghe has learned this lesson in the past - he's trusted someone when they've acted confused or innocent and he's gotten knives in the back for it - but he's still lived to learn that lesson to begin with. He may not have his cultivation or demonic abilities, and he may not be able to shake off an attempt on his life with quite the same ease as he has in the past, but Shen Yuan is small and weak. He could not kill Luo Binghe.

If this is a mistake, Luo Binghe will survive, and he'll have simply learned the lesson once more.

Luo Binghe's fingers curl tightly around Shen Yuan's phone. The screen of it is just as artificial and bright as the lights in the apartment lobby. Perhaps this is what is wrong with him, why Shen Qingqiu could not stand him: he discards the lessons life has taught him simply because he doesn't like them. Qing Jing Peak was truly never fit for him to begin with.

Luo Binghe retrieves his things from the mailbox he'd stashed them in and takes the elevator back up to Shen Yuan's floor. The lock to Shen Yuan's door is still broken, and the door doesn't quite fit right in its frame anymore.

Luo Binghe enters silently, closes the door behind him, and sits down in the entryway to lean his back against it. His weight makes the door stay closed properly.

He tries to sit perfectly still, but he isn't sure he manages it. He feels like the whole world is spinning around him, shaking with the force of the beast in his chest that is still pacing and running and making him feel like he needs to move until he finds something to hurt. He keeps reaching up to tug on his bangs only to brush them aside a moment longer, rubbing his thumb harshly against his forehead where his huadian lies.

Luo Binghe wishes the apartment was not so quiet.

When Shen Jiu arrives, he texts instead of knocking. Luo Binghe sits against the door and stares at Shen Yuan's phone as the messages come in.

> Open up idiot I brought your greasy noodles
> The longer you leave me out here the colder they'll get
> ...Did you seriously fall asleep after calling me out here?
> See if I ever do anything for you again
> I'm leaving your food outside your door but only because I have a better diet than you and the revenge of eating it in your stead isn't worth what it'll do to my arteries

The shadow of Shen Jiu's figure outside the apartment wavers; Luo Binghe hears the rustling of a plastic bag as he sets down the food. There's another pause, then another message.

> If your pet is the one who has you acting so weird, I'll help you look for him tomorrow
> On the condition that we turn him in to the cops or hospital or whatever

Shen Jiu leaves. Luo Binghe waits until he's sure he's gone, then fetches the bag of takeout. He puts it in Shen Yuan's fridge. When he closes the fridge door, one of the haphazardly shoved around stars on the Reward Board falls to the ground, and Luo Binghe stares at it for a long, quiet moment before reaching down to pick it up.

Luo Binghe might still end up stabbed in the back for even thinking there's a possibility that Shen Yuan did not know better, that he didn't mean to betray Luo Binghe.

He's dared to think otherwise now, though, and so he stares at the small star in his hand and he remembers the last time Shen Yuan had let him choose if a star was going to be good or bad. Luo Binghe had spent hours gluing Shen Yuan's weird plastic idols back together in order for that star to be good.

If Shen Yuan is an exception - if he really can be so stupid as not to recognize his own brother's face from the art of Luo Binghe's biography, if he really truly did not know better - how will Luo Binghe make this star good?

The stars aren't about *being* good or bad; they're about doing things that Shen Yuan either likes or doesn't.

Luo Binghe knows how to be liked by Shen Yuan. He knows that Shen Yuan will cave more easily if Luo Binghe makes himself seem pitiful. He could leave the apartment again and arrange for Shen Yuan to only find him when it's raining, when Luo Binghe is tucked in a dirty alleyway like the one he'd hid in today. He could make himself seem truly desperate and in need of help, and Shen Yuan would give it to him, if only because Shen Yuan seems incapable of *not* helping when he sees something pitiful.

Maybe this is what's wrong with Luo Binghe: he can't even think about how to actually make this star "good" in a real way. He can only think about how to manipulate Shen Yuan into liking him more, how to use what he knows about Shen Yuan to get what he wants.

Luo Binghe doesn’t know if he can change that. These stars were clearly meant as a training aid - kinder than ones he’s experienced in the past, but nonetheless sharing the same purpose as the beatings and whippings and withheld meals Luo Binghe had experienced before he came into his own power. None of those things ever made Luo Binghe want to be “better”; they only made him want to be liked more by the people administering the training. Perhaps there are some things that simply can’t be trained out of a person.

Luo Binghe swallows thickly. He puts the star back on the ground and returns to the entryway, once more sitting with his back against the door so it will stay shut.

He has many hours before Shen Yuan will wake up, so he settles in to wait.

Chapter End Notes

bingge: wow i feel awful and can't breathe right and don't feel safe or sane right now
bingge: wonder if i was cursed or smthn

i'll take the next couple days to catch up on comments again but in the mean time thank y'all as always for reading! and sorry to those who were very excited to see shen jiu this chapter - the plan WAS originally to have him make a real appearance and meet bingge proper, but it wasn't flowing right so i had to switch gears 😔 🙇

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Shen Yuan is really, really angry.

Chapter Notes

shout out to the influx of comments on the last chapter referring to bingge as some variation of an evil meow meow / wet animal / poor soggy baby boy. y'all are all so valid.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan wakes up blearily, feeling like his mind is stuffed with cotton balls. He can feel at least four distinct bruises from getting hit with those nasty little paintballs yesterday, and his feet ache from -

Well, it's not like he'd chased after Luo Binghe. Why would he? Luo Binghe had made sure to yell at him and accuse him of the strangest, stupidest conspiracy theory Shen Yuan had ever heard of before taking off. Any sane person would've dismissed the whole thing entirely. Maybe Shen Yuan's feet hurt from walking to a police station in order to make a report of a potential threat (??) to his brother. *That's* what a normal person would've done, not run all around town looking for some asshole.

Shen Yuan rolls over onto his side, blindly reaching for his favorite Bingpup pillow to shove over his face. It is very soft and fluffy and does not quite muffle Shen Yuan's frustrated yell.

Not that he has any reason to be letting out frustrated yells, of course! Shen Yuan is normal and sane and doesn't bother worrying about people who make up lies about his brother (???) and yell at him and run away after loudly proclaiming they want nothing to do with him ever again! A good yell is just part of any healthy, growing boy's morning routine!

Fuck.

Fuck!!

Shen Yuan yells some more into the Bingpup pillow, and kicks his legs about for good measure. All it really accomplishes is tangling up his sheets around his legs, and then he wants to yell about that, too.

He just - he's just so *mad.* Things had been going so well! They'd been having fun! Shen Yuan is really, really mad!!

Luo Binghe is still some weird roleplayer! He still doesn't have a real job! What good would come from him running off like that!!

Had Luo Binghe really just been using Shen Yuan to find someone - to find Shen Jiu (????) - this whole time after all? Had he really not -

But Luo Binghe hadn't protested being friends!

…Luo Binghe's also been plenty rude in the past. He's probably capable of lying about being friends, if he thinks it'll work out for him.

But someone that manipulative wouldn't just - have a near mental breakdown in front of someone they were busy manipulating, right? Clearly, there had to have been something wrong; maybe one of those paintball bullets had hit Luo Binghe square in the head and knocked some of his very limited number of brain cells out his ears.

Not that Shen Yuan cares. Obviously.

Luo Binghe's just some idiot who led him on - who was *rude* to him this *whole time* and Shen Yuan was just a *stupid softie* about it - and who may or may not be after Shen Yuan's brother now (??????). Shen Yuan doesn't give two shits about anyone who yells about never wanting to see him again. It was like some overly dramatic, unexplained soap opera with shitty unreasonable twists.

…Fuck, Shen Yuan is *so mad!!*

Whatever. Shen Yuan supposes he cares a *little* bit about Luo Binghe. Only because he needs to watch out for his brother, of course! Luo Binghe isn't really all that dangerous - more like a puppy who teethes on every available surface - but he's rude and presumptuous and might be after Shen Jiu's money or power or dubious fame.

Or whatever.

Anyway, if Shen Yuan cares just a little bit, just because of his brother, then he has stuff to do today. He should check in with his brother, first - check if Luo Binghe found him last night.

Not because he's worried about where some manipulative, terrible fake boyfriend of his ended up, but because he's worried about his brother. Obviously.

Shen Yuan yells a bit some more, kicks his legs around in an attempt to untangle them from his sheets, and reaches blindly for his phone from his bedside table.

His phone is not there.

Shen Yuan props himself up with one arm, staring blankly at his nightstand. Those are, without a doubt, Luo Binghe's cosplay robes and accessories folded up neatly and sitting where his phone should be.

Shen Yuan's Bingpup pillow falls out of his reach. He's going to have to handle this without yelling more. Fuck.

Shen Yuan leans over the edge of the bed, hoping his phone will just be laying innocently on the ground. Maybe Luo Binghe snuck into his room last night to leave his cosplay there and *didn't* take his phone.

His phone is not on the ground either.

Ah, fuck, Shen Yuan thinks, *of course it gets worse.*

Okay. Shen Yuan can do something about this. Even if Luo Binghe stole his laptop along with his phone, he should still be able to email his brother - or, fuck, maybe he really should contact the cops - from his PC. He can get help and let someone else take charge of this whole mess, and -

Fuck, Shen Yuan thinks again, *that asshole idiot jerk really didn't give two shits for what I did for him these past few months, did he? He - he really* was *just leading me on, that -!*

Shen Yuan rolls out of bed, his expression pinched with irritation. Who cares about some roleplaying-obsessed thief, ah? Not Shen Yuan! It's not any of his business why Luo Binghe got so freaked out over an image of Shen Jiu, not beyond making sure Luo Binghe doesn't try to steal from *him,* too! Shen Yuan doesn't care at all!!

Shen Yuan huffs, kicks the doorway of his room on the way out, and then immediately yelps and regrets it, hopping around on his uninjured foot and swearing under his breath. *That Luo Binghe, even making me stub my toe -!*

There's the sound of someone shifting around from further out in the apartment. Shen Yuan freezes, his balance wavering before he slowly, carefully sets his foot down. Cautiously, he peers around the doorframe into the rest of the apartment. The kitchen and living room look empty. He edges forward, trying to get a better view. Should he grab a weapon? Does he *have* a weapon??

Shen Yuan creeps further through his apartment. He *knows* he heard something out here, he really isn't going crazy this time!! He passes his kitchen, turns towards the front of the apartment, and -

"You -!" Shen Yuan yelps, blindly reaching behind him to grab a potential weapon from the open counter separating the kitchen and living room. He ends up raising an apple threateningly in Luo Binghe's direction.

Luo Binghe, who is sitting in Shen Yuan's entryway with his back leaning up against the front door, the perfect picture of innocence even though Shen Yuan knows he locked that door last night. He - well, he isn't covered in any obvious blood or injuries, and he looks mildly upset but that might just be his *face* , so that's - well, it's -

Shen Yuan raises his apple higher. He really will attack with it!!

Luo Binghe says nothing. His eyes flick up to the apple Shen Yuan is holding, then back to Shen Yuan's face.

Shen Yuan scowls. An apple is a fine weapon, don't dismiss it, ah!

"Do you have my phone," he grits out, scanning the collection of items around Luo Binghe. They look mostly to be like the things Shen Yuan had bought for Luo Binghe since he started staying with him, but -

Ah. Luo Binghe fidgets with Shen Yuan's phone, held tightly in his hands.

"Why do you have my phone," Shen Yuan amends bitterly. "And while you're at it, why don't you explain how breaking into my locked apartment counts as 'never wanting to see my face again,' huh?"

Which - what a stupid question. Shen Yuan should just give up on his phone and kick Luo Binghe out, seeing as he's insane enough to break into Shen Yuan's apartment in the middle of the night. Who cares what Luo Binghe's intentions are! Who cares *why* he said he doesn't ever want to see Shen Yuan again after Shen Yuan had really been feeling so - so -!

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at Shen Yuan. It looks half-hearted at best, compared to the weird shows of aggression or playfulness that Shen Yuan's seen from him before.

"Why didn't you tell me about Shen Jiu," Luo Binghe asks in return.

"I *did,"* Shen Yuan protests. "He came up several times before you freaked out about him. I told you about him - about cats, and revenge, and stuff."

Luo Binghe's adam apple bobs, and he looks down at Shen Yuan's phone in his hands. "You did," he says, not looking back up from the phone. "You - you weren't pretending he didn't exist."

Shen Yuan inches a bit closer to Luo Binghe. No blood, and no bruises either - no obvious head injury that might have caused brain trauma or memory loss or anything *else* that might explain Luo Binghe's weird behavior. He looks tired, perhaps, with the slight bruises beneath his eyes that come from a sleepless night, and his clothes are a bit wrinkled, and his hair is mused and out of place -

Focus, Shen Yuan scolds himself. Clearly, Luo Binghe is fine, considering he has the fortitude to break in and steal stuff. And - and even if he *wasn't* fine, it's not like that would be Shen Yuan's responsibility to deal with.

"Answer my questions, now," Shen Yuan says. "And give me my phone back."

Luo Binghe's fingers tighten around Shen Yuan's phone.

"Luo *Binghe,"* Shen Yuan scolds. "My *phone."*

"I left you my robes," Luo Binghe says, as if that has anything at all to do with answering Shen Yuan's demands. "I know silk isn't as valuable in your world, but the jewels in the belt

and hair crown -"

"I'm not into cosplay," Shen Yuan interrupts. "Give me my phone back."

Luo Binghe shakes his head wordlessly. Shen Yuan sighs, finally dropping the hand he'd held raised with his very threatening apple all this time and letting it hang limply at his side. This stubborn asshole-!

Shen Yuan takes a step forward, reaching out with his free hand to try and snatch his phone back from Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe tenses up all at once, pressing himself back against the front door, and jerks his head up to snap his teeth at Shen Yuan's hand. Shen Yuan jolts backwards, once more raising the apple threateningly.

"Don't fucking bite me," Shen Yuan warns, "and give me my fucking phone back."

"The jewels should be worth more than your phone," Luo Binghe argues. "The exchange rate is still good, I know -"

"I don't want your cosplay," Shen Yuan grits out. He leans down to try and reach for his phone again, and once more Luo Binghe presses himself as far into the door as he can while still trying to use his stupid pointy teeth to drive Shen Yuan off.

Shen Yuan, having the very useful weapon he does, shoves his apple into Luo Binghe's snapping teeth with one hand and snatches his phone with the other.

As soon as he has his phone, he leaps back several steps out of reach of Luo Binghe, who's currently making distressed noises muffled by the apple stuck firmly in his mouth. By the time Luo Binghe has managed to tear his teeth out of the apple and spit out the chunk of fruit he'd ripped out in doing so, Shen Yuan has already unlocked his phone and glanced over the screen it opened to.

"Give it *back -!"* Luo Binghe cries, but he stays put exactly where he's sitting up against the front door. "I paid for it, let me -"

"I never agreed to sell it to you," Shen Yuan spits, not glancing up from his phone.

It… it doesn't *look* like there are any blips in dialogue where messages may have been deleted or anything, but what *is* there doesn't seem particularly worth the distressed response from Luo Binghe. I mean, sure, Shen Yuan is pissed off that Luo Binghe stole his phone, and he's pissed off that he seems to have managed to drag Shen Jiu out in the middle of the night for no reason, but…

"This… you didn't say anything else to him?" Shen Yuan asks, glancing up from the phone to scrutinize Luo Binghe. "You didn't actually see him in person? You just… had him deliver you food and then hid until he left?"

"I don't have anything to say to that man," Luo Binghe scowls. "And I didn't - I didn't eat the food."

Shen Yuan stares blankly at Luo Binghe for a moment. He glances back down at the phone, then back up at Luo Binghe.

"...What did you want to hide so badly you wanted to buy my damn phone off me, then?"

For someone as weird and shameless as Luo Binghe usually is when it comes to doing whatever the fuck he wants, Shen Yuan was really expecting something much, much worse based on how Luo Binghe had clung to the phone!

(Shen Yuan really was expecting something much, much worse, for Luo Binghe to attempt to hide it. He feels so relieved he wants to throw up a bit.)

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at Shen Yuan again instead of answering. Irritated, Shen Yuan bares his own teeth right back at him.

"If you won't answer any of my questions, then you should just leave," he says, frustrated.

"I - you can't kick me out," Luo Binghe says.

"I am actively kicking you out," Shen Yuan corrects. "You may delay getting kicked out by answering my questions. What did you do to my brother?"

"I didn't -"

"You did *something,"* Shen Yuan interrupts, waving his phone around. "If it was just the messages I see here, you wouldn't have any further need for my phone. So: what the fuck did you do that made you want to keep my phone?"

There's no way it was just this, Shen Yuan thinks, even though he was so relieved to see that it *was* just this. *There's no way you told me to fuck off and never see you again just for something as stupid as a bowl of fucking noodles.* I *could have made you noodles - !*

Stupid. Fuck. Focus.

"I *didn't* -" Luo Binghe starts again, his voice higher and almost reedy, but before he can say anything else he snaps his mouth shut and visibly tries to compose himself before continuing. "I only sent the messages you saw. I didn't see him. I don't *want* to see him."

"Why are you making such a fuss then, ah?!"

"Why are you acting like that isn't enough to make you mad at me on its own?" Luo Binghe snaps back, and though his hands clench and unclench in his lap, he doesn't stand or make any move to get closer to take the phone back. Luo Binghe licks his lips, hesitating, and then repeats: "You can't kick me out."

"I sure as hell can," Shen Yuan scoffs, glancing back at his phone.

All that fuss Luo Binghe made, hissing and yelling at Shen Yuan the way a friend would *not* do, and - and he really only asked Shen Jiu to make a midnight noodle stop?

“I don’t have any way to go back,” Luo Binghe says, his lips pressed into a thin line. “I - if you kick me out, I won’t have anywhere to go.”

Shen Yuan blinks, looking back up at Luo Binghe. “Go back?”

He’s thought that Luo Binghe had been homeless this whole time; why would he have a place to go back *to?* It was half the reason Shen Yuan had been so - not worried, because that would be stupid, but -

Luo Binghe’s jaw works for a moment before he speaks again.

“I can’t - it’s not that I don’t want to, I really can’t. If you kick me out, I’ll be sleeping outside, and then I won’t be able to maintain societal standards for cleanliness, and then I won’t be able to get a job to pay for a place to stay.”

Shen Yuan blinks again. Luo Binghe glares up at him especially fiercely.

“Are you… trying to *guilt* me into letting you stay?” Shen Yuan asks, feeling a bit hysterical. “You - *you* were the one who said you never wanted to see my face again! What the fuck!!”

“It’ll work,” Luo Binghe says, still glaring up at Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan stares back at him, wide eyed. “If you’re - if you’re good, guilting you will work.”

Slowly, Shen Yuan sinks down to sit in the entryway a few feet in front of Luo Binghe.

“You’re really terrible,” he says. He wonders if maybe he’s still in bed, dreaming.

Luo Binghe keeps glaring at him. His hands are clenched around the hem of his shirt, worrying at the fabric. The shadows under his eyes look a bit worse than Shen Yuan had originally thought.

“You really freaked me out yesterday,” Shen Yuan says after a long moment. “You just - yelled at me out of nowhere and ran off.” *I couldn’t find you,* he refuses to say. “And then you just - what, you changed your mind? Or was stealing from me and irritating my brother with a stupid midnight takeout request enough for you to get over it?”

Luo Binghe’s jaw tenses, and his eyes flick to where Shen Yuan had set his phone on the ground next to him when he had sat down on the floor. The glare Luo Binghe has been wearing this whole time really looks less angry and more like the pinched expression of someone trying not to cry.

“Do you,” Luo Binghe starts, then pauses, licking his lips again. Shen Yuan hasn’t seen him this unnerved since he was about to meet those two small actors who could’ve been his old teacher. “Do you know who Shen Jiu looks like?”

Shen Yuan’s brow furrows. “...Like his mom? That’s what everyone says, at least.”

Luo Binghe laughs breathlessly. It sounds a bit disbelieving.

“No,” he says. “I look like Luo Binghe. Shen Jiu…”

"...looks like Shen Jiu? What are you even talking about?" Shen Yuan sighs, frustrated. "Binghe, I'm trying to understand what's going on here - I *won't* be guilted into keeping you around, I really won't."

Luo Binghe looks back up from the phone to meet Shen Yuan's eyes again. The glare is gone completely, now, but in its place is an expression so hungry that it takes Shen Yuan aback.

"You will," Luo Binghe says. "If you're really this good, I'll be able to convince you this way. Even if you kick me out now, I'll sleep on the bench outside of your apartment building, and the first night it rains, or there's a particularly bad air quality day, or you see something on the news about increased crime in the area - whether it's in two days or a month, you'll let me back in."

Shen Yuan stares at Luo Binghe in disbelief. Luo Binghe stares back, his pupils blown so wide that there's only the thinnest ring of pretty red-brown visible around them.

"You're right; I'm terrible," Luo Binghe says, quieter. "So if you really - if you really don't know about Shen Jiu, then I'll spend the rest of my life trying to trick you into letting me stay with you again. You'll worry about whether I'm eating or not, or if I'm getting into fights. And every time you see me, I'll tell you that I'm cold and that I miss you and anything else I can think of to make you invite me back inside. Eventually, it will work.

"If you don't know about Shen Jiu - if you didn't mean it - it means you really cared about me after all, and I'll be as terrible and manipulative as it takes to make you keep caring about me."

"Then I do know," Shen Yuan says, trying to draw himself up even though it feels like all the breath has been punched right out of him. "About Shen Jiu, and who he looks like - I know, and I meant whatever it was, so leave me alone."

"Who does he look like, then?" Luo Binghe asks, voice soft.

Shen Yuan swallows thickly. He… thinks he really does know, is the thing. Luo Binghe hadn't left much to the imagination yesterday when he'd suddenly started freaking out - he'd implied that somehow, Shen Jiu was the man Luo Binghe had been looking for as his 'Shizun.'

Shen Yuan doesn't quite understand how all the pieces line up. Shen Jiu certainly has no connection to any sort of community of nerds or roleplayers or *anyone* who likes trashy webnovels enough to make it their whole personality - no one outside of Shen Yuan himself, and even that Shen Jiu has made his disdain very clear on. And even if Luo Binghe had decided to go with the whole roleplaying gig after having met Shen Jiu - perhaps, indeed, inspired by who he thought Shen Jiu looked like - it still doesn't make sense. Shen Yuan knows his Er-ge had never been a teacher, not even briefly acting as a tutor or mentor for anyone that Shen Yuan is aware of.

Shen Jiu should have no connection to Luo Binghe, regardless of how strongly Luo Binghe believes otherwise.

But if it's just a question of who Shen Jiu looks like - if it's a question of who "Luo Binghe's Shizun" looks like - even Shen Yuan can think of the answer.

He supposes perhaps Shen Jiu shares some similarities with the way Shen Qingqiu had been drawn for official art. The sharpness of his features, the poised way he holds himself - the way Shen Qingqiu had always appeared in early chapters, at least, isn't so far off from the way Shen Yuan sees Shen Jiu.

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to say as much. He can tell Luo Binghe this - that he knows Luo Binghe must think Shen Jiu looks like Shen Qingqiu.

But Shen Yuan pauses, and he looks Luo Binghe over one last time. He's watching Shen Yuan with rapt attention, his eyes still blown wide and his hands still twisted up in his shirt. He's still pressed up against the door behind him, and he still looks like he didn't sleep at all last night, and -

And despite how irritated and offended Shen Yuan was after Luo Binghe had run off last night, Shen Yuan really had spent the better part of the evening searching for him.

Despite thinking that Luo Binghe may really have just been manipulating him this whole time, despite thinking that his brother may be next in Luo Binghe's warpath - despite those things, Shen Yuan was really most angry about not being able to find Luo Binghe, not being able to hunt him down and slap him over the head and help him, because Luo Binghe had been so clearly freaked out, and -

Fuck. Shen Yuan was - he *is,* he's still so very, very mad.

Shen Yuan swallows again. Luo Binghe's eyes flick down to watch the movement of Shen Yuan's throat, then dart right back up to watch Shen Yuan's face again.

"Do you really like me?" Shen Yuan blurts. "I mean -"

He cuts himself off. He doesn't know *what* he means.

(He wants Luo Binghe to take back what he'd said yesterday about not wanting to ever see Shen Yuan again. Shen Yuan had thought -

He'd thought they'd made really, really good friends.)

"I like you more than anyone I've ever known," Luo Binghe says. "I like the way you treat me more than any way I've ever been treated. I deserve you, more than anything or anyone I was looking for before."

"Then why the hell did you run away yesterday?" Shen Yuan asks, frustrated. "You… you were really mean about it."

Luo Binghe doesn't say anything, but his fingers twitch in the crumpled folds of his shirt, and his breath hitches, and then hitches again. His brows start to pinch together again - like the way he'd been glaring earlier, looking like he was holding back tears.

“Why would I have lied to you?” Shen Yuan asks, sighing heavily. “I - you *know* I tried to help you find your old teacher. You know I didn’t hide the existence of my brother. I still don’t understand how you have anything to do with him.”

Luo Binghe’s expression twists. “But you don’t know who Shen Jiu looks like, so it’s fine. You don’t know, so of course you wouldn’t understand. It’s - that’s a good thing.”

“He looks like Shen Qingqiu, right?” Shen Yuan asks, voice tired.

Luo Binghe goes so still Shen Yuan isn’t sure he’s breathing.

“You think he looks like Shen Qingqiu, and that’s - I don’t know, your reason for -” Shen Yuan breaks off, gesturing vaguely to all of Luo Binghe. “For being ‘Luo Binghe’ specifically, I guess - you thought my Er-ge looked like Shen Qingqiu, and you thought of him as your teacher, so naturally you would have to be ‘Luo Binghe.’ Is that right?”

“No,” Luo Binghe snaps. “No, that's - no, you’re not - *no,* no no -”

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan calls, “Binghe, look at me.”

Luo Binghe has never once stopped looking at Shen Yuan. “You weren’t supposed to - you *don’t* know, you don’t, take it back -”

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan calls again, some of his irritation fading into concern. Luo Binghe’s breathing is coming faster now, and Shen Yuan can’t help himself from scooting along the floor to get a bit closer to him. “Binghe, you were the one who said -”

“Fine!” Luo Binghe cries. “Fine, I - I don’t like you after all, I’ll leave, and I’ll be terrible to you in *different* ways, and -”

Luo Binghe breaks off. He sniffles, goes still, and then immediately slaps both hands over his face.

Shen Yuan stares at him. “...Are you crying?”

“No!” Luo Binghe lies. His shoulders shake, and he sniffles again.

“You… weren’t you just trying to warn me about how you would use all sorts of evil emotional manipulation tactics on me, making sure I would see how pitiful you’d look?” Shen Yuan asks, a bit baffled. “Why are you pretending you aren’t crying now?”

“It’s *different!”* Luo Binghe cries. Then he pauses, seems to realize he should have objected in a different way there, and adds: “I’m not crying.”

Shen Yuan falls silent, watching Luo Binghe try not to cry, listening to his stuttering breath and occasional sniffling. Luo Binghe’s shoulders hunch up higher and his head ducks lower into his hands as if that will hide it all, and Shen Yuan watches without saying anything, his expression twisted with a hundred conflicting feelings.

Yesterday, the more Shen Yuan had searched for Luo Binghe, the angrier he'd gotten. He was mad at himself and at Luo Binghe and at himself some more, and he fell asleep after dreaming up an imaginary world where Luo Binghe showed back up again to grovel at Shen Yuan's feet. He'd appear, declare himself healthy and perfectly mentally stable, say he was Shen Yuan's friend after all, and then maybe put on a muzzle and follow Shen Yuan around on all fours until Shen Yuan could find it in his heart to forgive him.

That was just for the things Shen Yuan knew about *last night.*

Since then, Luo Binghe has stolen Shen Yuan's phone, impersonated him, dragged Shen Jiu out in the middle of the night to deliver noodles that Luo Binghe apparently didn't even eat, and *broke into Shen Yuan's apartment* in order to achieve all that in the first place.

And yet -

And yet stupidly, Shen Yuan is just still angry about the same things he'd been angry about last night. He just wants to keep asking about why Luo Binghe left in the first place, why Luo Binghe didn't trust Shen Yuan, why he didn't just sit and stay and *ask normally* if he thought Shen Jiu was related to his old teacher -

Things that really, really shouldn't be so important to Shen Yuan when there are objectively worse things that Luo Binghe has done in the last twelve hours. If Shen Yuan just lets all that go to focus on his stupid questions about yesterday, what else would he let Luo Binghe get away with in the future? His Er-ge seems to have avoided getting mixed up into anything too terrible this time, but what about the next?

But…

Luo Binghe is still pretending not to cry. He's still hiding his face from Shen Yuan, as if that actually makes a difference.

Maybe Luo Binghe broke into his apartment last night, but - but he did come back, in the end, even if it was through criminal methods. And maybe this is one of the worst things Luo Binghe has done, but it's also clearly the worst Luo Binghe's ever *felt* about doing something shitty, too.

It's possible that this is just one of those attempts at manipulation that Luo Binghe had warned Shen Yuan about - maybe Luo Binghe knows that Shen Yuan will pity him if he sits there and makes those awful, choked noises that a man trying not to cry but crying anyway makes. He'd been pretty upfront about all his stupid evil plans to manipulate Shen Yuan into caring for him, after all.

…Fuck, though, it really does work!

Shen Yuan swallows thickly. He wants to see just how badly Luo Binghe looks, wants to see Luo Binghe looking so wretched that there isn't any way he could be faking it. He wants to see Luo Binghe look miserable out of spite for the emotional turmoil he's sent Shen Yuan through for months now.

He wants to see Luo Binghe cry just because he thinks Luo Binghe would look a bit cute crying, too.

“Can I see?” Shen Yuan asks, once more scooting closer to Luo Binghe.

Luo Binghe’s fingers spasm, then press tighter to his face. His breathing sounds wet and muffled behind his hands.

It’s really, truly pitiful. Shen Yuan feels a small thrill race through him.

Carefully, he reaches out to gently pry Luo Binghe’s hands away from his face. Luo Binghe twitches under his touch, resisting - but then Shen Yuan clicks his tongue, and Luo Binghe stops fighting it and lets Shen Yuan guide his hands down away from his face.

His face is… really wet, for someone who’s only been crying for barely a minute. His lashes have already managed to clump together, wet and ugly, and his mouth is twisted like he wants to snarl at something but doesn’t know what. The tears beading at the corners of his eyes are big and glistening, and when he sniffles again it sounds gross and sad.

Luo Binghe is, objectively, a very ugly crier. Shen Yuan should *not* be charmed - he should not be thinking even the vaguest of thoughts of how pretty Luo Binghe looks, even like this!

“...Put that back,” Shen Yuan says, pulling Luo Binghe’s hands back up to his face. “I changed my mind, don’t show me that face.”

Luo Binghe hiccups, letting Shen Yuan move his hands as he pleases. Shen Yuan drags them close enough to almost put them back over Luo Binghe’s pitiful, tearful eyes, and then at the last second ends up letting go and just bringing his own hands to Luo Binghe’s face instead.

Luo Binghe doesn’t let his hands fall far. He clings to Shen Yuan’s wrists as Shen Yuan gently rubs his thumbs through the tear tracks on Luo Binghe’s cheeks. It barely does anything to wipe the tears away; mostly, he ends up just smearing them around some more.

It settles something deep in Shen Yuan, smearing Luo Binghe’s ugly tears into his skin. *Yes,* he thinks, *you really are miserable, aren’t you?*

“You really are terrible,” Shen Yuan says aloud, softer than he’d said it the first time. “And I still don’t understand what you think my brother has to do with you, or why you don’t believe me when I say I don’t understand. There’s no way he was your old teacher.”

“You recognize him, though,” Luo Binghe whines.

Shen Yuan pauses his useless tear-wiping to use both hands to squeeze Luo Binghe’s cheeks together, making his mouth pucker oddly. Luo Binghe glares at him, but the hands still clinging to Shen Yuan’s wrists make no effort to pull him away.

“Of course I recognize him; he’s my brother, and you basically spelled out the answer you were looking for,” Shen Yuan says, shaking Luo Binghe’s face around a bit.

“But -” Luo Binghe starts to protest, voice still whiny but now also muffled from Shen Yuan’s cheek-squishing efforts. Shen Yuan shushes him.

“Luo Binghe,” he says, using his grip on Luo Binghe’s face to nudge him so he’s looking straight at Shen Yuan. “I didn’t know you thought Shen Jiu was your ‘Shizun.’ To be perfectly honest, I hope I never have to understand why you thought such a silly thing.”

Luo Binghe shivers, his fingers curling tighter around Shen Yuan’s wrists. Another fat, pretty teardrop falls from his eye; Shen Yuan releases one of Luo Binghe’s cheeks so he can wipe it away.

Ah, Shen Yuan is really about to say something stupid, here.

“If you don’t want me to kick you out,” he says, “then you have to believe me, and you have to apologize, and you have to -”

Shen Yuan grasps for his thoughts. He had a whole list of ways he wanted Luo Binghe to grovel, before he saw Luo Binghe cry.

“Um, you have to do what I tell you to later,” he finishes lamely.

Luo Binghe stares at him, wide-eyed. Shen Yuan can practically see his weird, angry little brain whirling a mile a minute.

“This is a time sensitive response, Binghe,” he says, patting at Luo Binghe’s cheek. “I already have your very nice warning about your emotional manipulation tactics - if I look at this ugly wet face of yours for too long, I’ll surely grow immune.”

Luo Binghe’s nose scrunches up. “You think I’m ugly?” He whines, a new round of tears welling up in his eyes.

“No,” Shen Yuan immediately denies, and then quickly follows up with: “Shut up, who cares.”

“I care,” Luo Binghe cries, finally making some effort to tug his face away from Shen Yuan’s hands, clearly with the intent to hide it away again.

“Ah, you big baby…” Shen Yuan sighs, and then finally just scoots himself the rest of the way into Luo Binghe’s lap. “Here, if you’re going to hide, do it here,” he says, guiding Luo Binghe to tuck his head into Shen Yuan’s neck.

“‘m not hiding,” Luo Binghe grumbles, even as he goes willingly and smears his gross wet face all over Shen Yuan’s neck and shoulder. “What do I have to hide for?”

“Fine, then I’m hiding you myself, so I can come to my senses and change my mind about forgiving you before you work up the nerve to apologize.”

“I’m sorry,” Luo Binghe says immediately, like all his breath has been punched out of him. “I’ll believe you - I’ll believe anything. I’m -”

He cuts himself off, pressing his face more firmly into the crook of Shen Yuan's neck. Shen Yuan lets out a shuddering breath that he hopes Luo Binghe doesn't feel. He just - he's really, really glad that Luo Binghe apologized.

"And?" Shen Yuan prods, bringing a hand up to gently stroke Luo Binghe's hair.

"And I'll do what Yuan-ge tells me," Luo Binghe says obediently into Shen Yuan's skin.

Shen Yuan tugs meanly at Luo Binghe's hair. That, too, is very satisfying - he wants to tug more, and see Luo Binghe look wretched and crying more, and have Luo Binghe be curled up around Shen Yuan like this so Shen Yuan knows he's here and safe and not getting into trouble in the city night.

"Who told you that you'd earned the right to call me 'Ge' again so soon?" He asks.

Luo Binghe tenses up, the arms that had creeped up to curl around Shen Yuan locking tight around him. Pressed so close like this, Shen Yuan can hear very clearly when Luo Binghe's breath hitches, and he can feel it when Luo Binghe's chest heaves, and -

And ah, Luo Binghe really is the sort of person who can't stop crying once he's started, isn't he? He really is… the most pitiful sort of person after all.

"Don't cry, ah," Shen Yuan says, dismayed. "Isn't there a path ahead of you that will make things better? Why are you crying harder just because I told you not to call me so familiarly right now?"

"If you can't be my Yuan-ge, what's the point of everything else?" Luo Binghe cries.

"Surely, Binghe has other things he thinks are important, too?"

Luo Binghe shakes his head fiercely, rubbing his nose into Shen Yuan's shoulder uncomfortably the whole time.

"Well, fine, then - I have things that *I* think are important. If you like me so much, then those should be important to you, too."

"...Like what?" Luo Binghe mumbles, clearly already feeling a bit regretful.

"Like, I want to eat the food you cook," Shen Yuan says. Luo Binghe hums against the skin of Shen Yuan's neck; Shen Yuan can feel the vibration travel all the way up and down his spine.

"That's alright," Luo Binghe says, "I can care about that, too, if Yuan-ge -"

Shen Yuan tugs at his hair again. Luo Binghe whines again. He really is just like a sodden lost pet.

"And," Shen Yuan says, ignoring Luo Binghe's pitiful noises, "I want you to get a real job, so you can buy yourself your own laptop and phone and stop stealing mine."

“What’s wrong with being paid to be your boyfriend?” Luo Binghe all but simpers, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“Luo Binghe, I haven’t paid you once,” he snorts, patting at Luo Binghe’s hair. Patting is just as good as pulling, ah… “I’ve bought you some necessities and I’ve given you a place to stay, but you certainly didn’t do a good enough job at being my fake boyfriend that you were getting bonuses.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Luo Binghe says, sounding a bit offended. “I wasn’t a fake anything. And I don’t mind if you buy everything for me.”

“Then you’re fired outright,” Shen Yuan deadpans. Luo Binghe gears up for another round of whiny, tearful complaints.

Shen Yuan sighs. There’s really only one way to get things through to this thick-headed fool, huh?

“How about this, then: I don’t want to not-fake-date anyone who doesn’t have their own money,” he amends.

Luo Binghe’s fingers dig into Shen Yuan’s back uncomfortably. “That’s not *fair,”* he cries.

Shen Yuan waits.

“...Okay,” Luo Binghe sighs after a moment, voice resigned. “Then can I call you Yuan-ge again?”

Shen Yuan sighs. He’d been putting off this next one.

“No,” he says, gently coaxing Luo Binghe out from the crook of his neck and once more taking his face between his hands. “Binghe, I need you to get along with my brother, too.”

Luo Binghe tenses up beneath Shen Yuan’s hands, and Shen Yuan finds himself absently kneading at Luo Binghe’s cheeks as he waits for him to calm down enough to keep listening. In slow, slow increments, Luo Binghe relaxes again, though his expression grows more petulant as he does so.

“I already told you,” he grumbles, “I don’t want to have anything to do with that man.”

“Too late for that,” Shen Yuan snorts.

If he’s going to be this stupid - if he’s really going to let Luo Binghe back in just because he cried a bit - then at the every least, Shen Yuan needs to enforce this one thing. If the very image and thought of Shen Jiu made Luo Binghe freak out and act so terribly last night, then clearly it needs to be addressed.

“You don’t have to go so far as to be his friend,” Shen Yuan says, trying to placate Luo Binghe a bit. “I still don’t understand the ‘why’ of it, but it’s clear enough that he upsets you. Just getting along is enough.”

“I don’t care enough about him for him to upset me,” Luo Binghe protests, looking very much like a sulking child. Shen Yuan hums.

“Okay,” he says. “But still, you have to get along. Even if it’s just pretending to be nice to him when he’s around, even if it’s just pretending to be *neutral* to him when he’s around - you have to get along.”

Luo Binghe makes a face. Once more, Shen Yuan waits.

“...If I agree, can I call you Yuan-ge again?”

“You can call me Yuan-ge again when my Er-ge can manage to sit in the same room as you for a full hour,” Shen Yuan says gently, even though he knows it’s a bit of a cruel condition.

Luo Binghe, seeming to sense as much, turns his head in Shen Yuan’s hands to bite at one of his palms. Shen Yuan uses his other hand to pinch at Luo Binghe’s nose until he lets go, and then pinches it a bit more for good measure. Luo Binghe isn’t actively crying anymore, but he’s still sniffling occasionally, and he makes a face as he tries to shake Shen Yuan off so he can sniffle pitifully in peace.

Shen Yuan drops his hands from Luo Binghe’s face entirely, watching him. Luo Binghe’s still clinging tightly to him, both hands tugging at the back of Shen Yuan’s shirt as he tries to pull Shen Yuan closer into him. He doesn’t try to hide in Shen Yuan’s shoulder again, though, so he must be feeling a bit better.

“Okay?” Shen Yuan asks.

“Okay,” Luo Binghe mumbles.

Shen Yuan nods once firmly. “Good. Now, let me up - you need to wash this ugly face of yours before you end up with permanent tear stains.”

And I need to stop looking at you crying before I make any more stupid concessions, Shen Yuan thinks, a bit morose.

Luo Binghe whines wordlessly, leaning in to try and bite at Shen Yuan’s cheek. Shen Yuan catches him by his hair, tugging him back away from his face.

“Okay, your face isn’t ugly,” Shen Yuan revises, “but it still needs to be cleaned up.”

Luo Binghe sniffles again but stops trying to bite Shen Yuan, and Shen Yuan feels a bit like laughing. When he tries to stand up from Luo Binghe’s lap, though, Luo Binghe catches him and tries to keep him solidly in his lap. Shen Yuan raises one eyebrow at him wordlessly.

Luo Binghe, alarmingly, gives Shen Yuan a guilty look.

“What *now?”* Shen Yuan asks, exasperated.

“If we get up, you’re just going to be mad again.”

“I’m *still* mad at you,” Shen Yuan corrects, patting at Luo Binghe’s shoulder impatiently. “Up, Binghe.”

Luo Binghe makes a face but lets him up, and then he lets Shen Yuan pull him up, too.

The door that Luo Binghe had been leaning against this whole time swings open. The frame of the door is splintered apart near the lock.

Shen Yuan stares in disbelief.

“...You…”

“I told you,” Luo Binghe mumbles, uselessly pushing the door back into place. It swings back out again as soon as he lets go.

“You… you couldn’t have just picked the lock like a *normal person?!”* Shen Yuan cries, finally having found his voice. “You - you’re really a brute after all, ah!”

“I don’t know how to do that,” Luo Binghe whines. “This was easier…”

Shen Yuan turns from the door to level Luo Binghe with his best, most disappointed glare. *“Two* hours with my Er-ge before you get Yuan-ge privileges back,” he hisses.

“Yuan-ge -!”

“What did I just say?!” Shen Yuan scolds, reaching up to whack at Luo Binghe’s shoulder. “Ah? Are you even listening?!”

Luo Binghe scowls, turning his face away. Shen Yuan whacks at him some more.

“I’ll learn how to lockpick for next time,” Luo Binghe grumbles.

Shen Yuan wants to go back to kicking door frames and yelling into pillows. He thinks that would be easier to process than Luo Binghe talking about a ‘next time.’

“There will be no next time,” Shen Yuan says. “Luo Binghe, are you listening to me? *No next time.”*

“What if I get locked out?” Luo Binghe asks petulantly.

“Then you sit outside and wait for me to graciously let you in!!”

“In the *cold?”*

“I’ll give you a house key!” Shen Yuan cries, and then immediately snaps his mouth shut, scowling up at Luo Binghe. “You - you tricked me into saying that!”

Luo Binghe finally peeks back over at him. He looks perfectly and completely innocent.

“Well - well *fine!* I’ll teach you the importance of going back on your word, just you see, I’ll give you a key anyway since I already said so,” Shen Yuan says.

“Okay,” Luo Binghe says smugly. “I’ll learn well, then.”

“And in exchange,” Shen Yuan continues, “I’m not going to give you back any of the good boy stars I took away to put on the bad side of the board last night.”

Luo Binghe’s expression morphs into one of horror. “Wait, no -”

“Nope! Like I said, I won’t go back on my word, I already said it, too late! No returns or exchanges!”

“Yuan-ge, please -”

Shen Yuan whacks him again. It’s probably fine.

(Luo Binghe isn’t crying anymore. It’s definitely - well, maybe not fine right *now,* but it will be.

Shen Yuan will make sure of it.)

Chapter End Notes

just one chapter left!! it'll be loose ends + etc, i promise there won't be any more evil angst surprises 😂
thank y'all as always for reading + leaving nice comments, i rly do appreciate them even if i'm chronically behind in responding dfjkhg

edit: there's more!! fanart!!! from yohannnb, an absolutely delicious rendition of angry, pouty bingge getting his cheeks squished by sy as he cries 🥰🥰 the tear tracks down bingge's face are especially tasty here, go check it out!!

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe gets a job, gets fired from his job, and has his happily whatever after.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Shen Yuan herds Luo Binghe off to take a shower - after Luo Binghe disappears to put his hair neatly back into place and change his clothes and wash the smell of tears away - time seems to pass a bit too quickly to be real. There are things to do, and they all have to get done so quickly that there simply isn't time to linger.

Most urgently, Shen Yuan has to call his brother to tell him *not* to come over, as well as to thank him for the noodles. Don't worry, Er-ge, this silly brother of yours had just been unexpectedly unavailable last night because Luo Binghe had come back (the truth), and there wasn't a chance to check his phone with the way he had to focus on how much groveling Luo Binghe was doing (a lie)!

"Hmph," Shen Jiu says, acting as if he is terribly irritated and hadn't picked up the phone on the very first ring. "I hope you made that little pest cry before marching him right to the nearest police station."

"Well, he did cry…" Shen Yuan replies weakly, staring off blankly in the direction of the bathroom. The sound of the shower had just stopped, and Shen Yuan can hear the vague noises of Luo Binghe drying off and getting dressed.

He wonders if Luo Binghe's cheeks will still be flushed pink when he comes out of the shower, or if his eyes will still be rimmed with the horrid red of someone who's been crying. He wonders if he can brush Luo Binghe's hair for him while it's wet, pretending to find all sorts of tangles in it to have an excuse to pull at it some more, or - or pet it too, that would be good also…

"You disgust me," Shen Jiu says, startling Shen Yuan out of his thoughts.

"I did punish him," Shen Yuan protests, and quickly outlines the terms of the deal for Luo Binghe to get 'Yuan-ge' privileges back.

Shen Jiu's irritation quickly clears up into spiteful glee when he learns of his own role in that deal. Shen Yuan almost feels a bit bad with how clearly he can picture his Er-ge's wicked expression - two hours at Shen Jiu's mercy really is a long time, ah…

“Oh, good, it’s about time you gave *me* control over which animals you feed - I have far better taste than you,” Shen Jiu says, undoubtedly smug about being handed down as a punishment. “How many times do you think I can walk out right before his time is up before he’ll snap and do something you’ll finally send him away for?”

“Er-ge…”

Shen Jiu sniffs, tells him to throw out the noodles from last night if he won’t eat them after all, and hangs up. Typical.

And then, after calling his brother, he has to call his landlord. The door can’t stay broken after all, and as much as he’d love to make Luo Binghe fix it himself he doesn’t want to have a busted door for two weeks while Luo Binghe learns how to do that.

Then after the landlord, it’s imperative that Shen Yuan place a delivery order for some groceries. Shen Yuan wants Luo Binghe to cook him something *good* today, for every single meal, because Shen Yuan is going to be as bitchy as possible for as long as possible about ordering Luo Binghe around. He’s going to make that dog regret running away in the first place, ah!!

And, uh, regret the other stuff too, of course. Obviously.

And then, of course, Luo Binghe has to actually *make* a meal - a late breakfast, first. He sorts through the groceries with his hair still damp, and his cheeks *are* still flushed pink from the heat of the shower, and -

Ah. Shen Yuan makes himself look back down at his phone. Very important stuff to look at there, of course.

“Make me something heavy and rich,” Shen Yuan demands, pretending to be writing some sort of very important message on his phone. “Something especially hard to make, maybe. Definitely.”

Struggle a bit. Make something so heavy it will sit in your stomach like a weight, making you feel so sluggish you won’t ever be able to run anywhere fast, Shen Yuan mentally tacks on, feeling a bit vindictive.

Luo Binghe obeys.

But Shen Yuan hadn’t accounted for eating the meal *himself,* too, and so then *he* feels heavy and sluggish and wants a nap, and -

And the whole day falls like dominoes just like that, one thing after the other, all so important and urgent that Shen Yuan never has to think too hard about the way the morning had first started on the floor of his apartment entrance. It feels like Shen Yuan has only had enough time to blink between then and now, even though he knows it’s been hours.

The early afternoon sun filtering in through the window is too bright to nap deeply, unfortunately. Shen Yuan had stirred awake feeling overly hot from the sun and the weight on

top of him long enough ago now that he'd gotten restless, and eventually had shuffled around until he could pull out his phone to scroll idly through.

Don't ask why Shen Yuan doesn't simply get up off the couch now that he's awake and bored. Getting up from the couch just isn't an option.

After all, the weight pressing into him and making him feel so hot and stuffy is a sleeping Luo Binghe, who had indelicately laid himself atop Shen Yuan sometime during his nap - as if *Shen Yuan* were the flight risk here, ah! Shen Yuan *should* get up, just to watch Luo Binghe spill onto the floor and wake up like that!!

…Shen Yuan spares a moment to glance up from his phone and stare at Luo Binghe's face. The angle is a bit weird, and his cheek is squished and his nose has been pushed to be slightly crooked from the way Luo Binghe has buried his face in Shen Yuan's chest, but Shen Yuan can still make out the tired bruises under Luo Binghe's eyes from a sleepless night.

How truly disrespectful to the common folk, letting such a pretty face get marred with something preventable like that, ah…

No, getting up from the couch is not an option. Shen Yuan can only submit himself to playing with his phone, alternating between trying to be productive and blowing off steam by leaving particularly vicious comments on whatever bullshit webnovel is at the top of the promoted page.

He has a lot of steam to blow off, today.

During one of Shen Yuan's more productive spurts, Luo Binghe stirs awake. Shen Yuan can feel the way his breathing changes and the way his muscles flex just slightly, and he's mentally prepared for Luo Binghe's awakening long before Luo Binghe himself announces it.

Well, not that Luo Binghe 'announces' it in any normal sort of way, either, but he shimmies himself around with purpose until he's got his arms positioned in a weird approximation of a hug.

"You're holding on too tight," Shen Yuan grunts, not looking up from his phone. He can feel the pressure from each of Luo Binghe's fingers grabbing tightly around his waist. "If you don't ease up, you'll leave bruises."

Luo Binghe doesn't say anything, but his grip gets even tighter, pressing so hard into Shen Yuan that it only barely doesn't hurt. Shen Yuan sighs.

"There's something very wrong with you," he says, but he doesn't do anything but lay there and let Luo Binghe press his fingers into him.

"Mm," Luo Binghe says, muffled by the way he's turned his face to be more completely buried in Shen Yuan's shirt.

“I can’t make a very good pillow,” Shen Yuan grouses. “If you wanted to take a nap too, you could’ve gone back to your own bed.”

“You’re skin and bones,” Luo Binghe agrees. “Eat more of my food and become a better pillow, if you’re worried about it.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes, deciding to just move on. “Well, let up for just long enough to pay attention, then: I was trying to find you a decent job while I was lying here, being crushed by your stupidly heavy body.”

“I’m not a very good pillow either,” Luo Binghe sighs in agreement. “Too much muscle.”

“Why is it that when you finally agree with me that you aren’t the world’s most perfect man, it’s for something like *this?”*

Luo Binghe turns his head to glare up at Shen Yuan. “Muscle is *very* desirable and perfect. Plenty of people think so.”

“Not the people who’d rather be trapped under a nice plush pillow than a couple hundred pounds of muscle,” Shen Yuan complains.

Luo Binghe shifts so that somehow even more of his weight is pressing Shen Yuan into the couch. Shen Yuan gives up.

…It isn’t so bad, anyway.

“I was trying to find you a job while you were sleeping,” Shen Yuan says again. “Of jobs that are hiring near us, I think you have a couple options.”

Luo Binghe makes a face and turns his head back into Shen Yuan’s chest. His nose digs uncomfortably into him, and Shen Yuan spares a hand to pat gently at Luo Binghe’s head until he can be coaxed into a better position.

“First up,” Shen Yuan says. “You could probably be a referee for some sort of sport. You’d have to start as a volunteer for a youth club or whatever first, but eventually, you could be in a position where you tell people they fucked up and *also* get to learn about sports and exercise and activity or whatever sports guys are into.”

“Vetoed,” Luo Binghe says bluntly. “Next.”

“Ah? I know it might be a bit difficult for someone like you to actually get the position, but I really do think you’d enjoy this one best. You can boss people around a bit -”

“I thought muscles weren’t desirable,” Luo Binghe grumbles, absolutely spiteful. “What do you need to go to all those sports games and look at all those muscled guys for?”

“I - what - I wouldn’t be going to - this is *your* job -!”

Luo Binghe growls a bit. *“Vetoed.”*

“Fine, fine, whatever!” Shen Yuan huffs, turning his attention back to his phone to pull up the homepage for the next job option. “Another option you might have is a maid cafe - some people like the tsundere asshole type, so you could make it your brand.”

Shen Yuan tugs absently on Luo Binghe’s hair as he talks, turning his phone to show Luo Binghe a picture. Luo Binghe begrudgingly lifts his head up at Shen Yuan’s tugging to glare at the phone, but his glare goes away once he sees the photo Shen Yuan pulled up.

“Hm,” he hums consideringly, eyes narrowed at the overly happy people dressed in service outfits and holding various cutesy foods. “This one isn’t bad.”

“Of course it isn’t, I worked very hard to find jobs that might tolerate you, you know -”

“Would the cafe have private bathrooms that lock nicely?” Luo Binghe interrupts. “Preferably with good sound proofing.”

Shen Yuan stares down at him. Slowly, he turns the phone back around to himself, looking at the picture. He’d just pulled up the first one, but - ah, it really is all girls in short dresses there, does Luo Binghe think he wants -

“No! No, no, look -” Shen Yuan frantically pulls up a picture that features a man in it too, dressed in a far more reasonable butler’s outfit with absolutely *no* thigh on display. “You’d be dressed up like *this,* no - no *anything* you’re thinking of!!”

“Oh,” Luo Binghe says, sounding a bit disappointed.

Shen Yuan cannot even *think* about what that disappointment means - it took all his face just to make the connection between private, soundproof bathroom stalls and what could be done in them to someone wearing a short frilly dress, ah!!

“Okay, okay, I changed my mind, not this job after all!” Shen Yuan says, closing out of the page for the maid cafe.

“That’s alright, Yuan-ge can buy me the outfit separately -”

“No ‘Yuan-ge’ right now!!” Shen Yuan yells, only a little bit hysterically.

Luo Binghe huffs but settles back down onto Shen Yuan’s chest. Shen Yuan takes several deep breaths to recenter himself so he can continue as if everything is very normal. Luo Binghe’s grip on him eases and tightens with every breath, flexing around the motion of Shen Yuan’s chest.

“There’s really only one other option that would suit your personality at all,” Shen Yuan finally says. “Only one place where all the customers will be so poor at social interaction that they won’t be expecting perfect customer service from you, and where the establishment is shady enough they’ll hire anyone willing to put up with it. No outfits, no - um, no men in this sort of place who might make you feel like your masculinity is being threatened by letting other people look at their muscles.”

“I’ve never been threatened by another man,” Luo Binghe protests, and Shen Yuan cuffs him over the head.

“I threaten you all the time, shut up.”

“But if it can’t be the one with the dress-up play, and it has no other attractive men for you to be looking at,” Luo Binghe says, “I’ll tolerate it.”

“You’re like if someone learned how to talk by reading exclusively trashy romance novels with toxic male leads,” Shen Yuan grumbles. “But fine - internet cafe staff it is.”

The exhausted looking college kid behind the counter of the internet cafe raises a brow when Luo Binghe comes in with Shen Yuan at his side - really, Shen Yuan feels a bit like a parent sending their kid off to school! - but he doesn’t say anything other than the customary run down of what Luo Binghe will be expected to do and how.

Likely, he’s thinking something along the lines of, *‘who cares if it’s two of them doing the work, only one will get paid!’* as Shen Yuan dutifully follows along, taking note of the limited menu the cafe offers and the system to take customer orders.

Unfortunately for both the other employee and Luo Binghe, Shen Yuan is only paying such close attention so he knows what to scold Luo Binghe for later.

“You’re supposed to take my money *before* handing me the punch card,” Shen Yuan chides, pushing the card back across the counter at Luo Binghe.

“It’s the same either way, so just -”

“What if I ran off with the punch card?”

“You’d be in the same building,” Luo Binghe snaps, “I’d catch you and steal double the amount owed.”

“Wrong!” Shen Yuan scolds, reaching across the counter to whack Luo Binghe’s arm. “What happened to customer service? Theft is still theft even if part of it is owed!!”

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at Shen Yuan, pushing the card back across the counter. Shen Yuan pushes it right back.

“How about I handle up front,” the tired, greasy looking employee who had trained Luo Binghe says, having been standing to the side watching this exchange in mild mortification. “And Luo Binghe… you said you can cook, right?”

So Luo Binghe gets shuffled into the kitchen of the cafe, still required to be servicing the customers but from a far less visible location.

Er, it *would* be less visible, if Luo Binghe didn’t keep wandering out of the kitchen to the computer Shen Yuan had gotten set up at.

“I am going to throw this out,” Luo Binghe says through gritted teeth, holding up a bag of frozen… meat, of some sort, though Shen Yuan can’t quite tell *which* sort it’s meant to be.

“Has it gone bad?” Shen Yuan asks, glancing up from the game he’d been playing. This is an online game, Binghe, there’s no pause option to inspect your mystery meat!!

“I am positive it has never been good,” Luo Binghe says. “I am going to throw it out.”

Shen Yuan snorts. “You’re very bad at asking permission for things.”

“Why would I ask for permission?” Luo Binghe scoffs. “I can do what I want.”

“Don’t throw any food out without confirming with your manager first,” Shen Yuan warns.

“...Is that not what I am doing,” Luo Binghe deadpans. Shen Yuan can’t quite stop himself from laughing at Luo Binghe, but he does shoo him back off to the kitchens and gives him a half-hearted warning to *stay* there.

Then Shen Yuan turns back to his game, successfully gets through an entire match without being interrupted, and immediately shuts the game off and gets up to go over to the kitchens.

Not hearing from Luo Binghe for that extended amount of time is actually *way* more concerning than the frequent visits out of the kitchen, actually! That awful man is just like a toddler: the less you hear from him, the more certain it is that he’s up to no good!!

Predictably, Shen Yuan finds Luo Binghe in an argument with a customer who had gone up to the kitchen wondering why his crappy instant meal was taking non-instant amounts of time to be made.

“This place isn’t clean,” Luo Binghe is saying, expression contorted in disgust. “Nothing will be made until it is fixed.”

“How much fucking work does it take to wipe down a microwave?” The customer scoffs.

Luo Binghe all but hisses like an offended cat.

“The floors are sticky. The counters are stained. The stove has only a single working burner. The *microwave* is cursed to only produce slop good enough for the likes of your type, but I won’t be serving you before *him,”* Luo Binghe says, nodding in Shen Yuan’s direction as he approaches.

Ah, that’s right. Shen Yuan had forgotten he’d ordered anything to begin with. He’d only done it to bother Luo Binghe a bit, after all - the food in this sort of place is never *good.*

“Ah? Are the sticky floors keeping your feet glued to the ground so you can’t walk the two steps needed to get to the mop?” The customer says, slapping a hand down onto the counter between him and Luo Binghe. “Lazy ass, fix the problem if there is one, that’s your job!”

Luo Binghe sniffs, turning his head away. “Your insults are boring,” he says.

“Binghe!” Shen Yuan scolds, finally managing to break out of the daze of watching them both in horror to actually say something.

Unfortunately, both of them ignore him.

“What, like calling my food ‘slop’ is that much more interesting? Fuck right off, pretty boy.”

“What insult? Wasn’t I just speaking the truth? If I were to insult you, wouldn’t it be enough to just congratulate you on your position as the face of contraception everywhere?” Luo Binghe sneers. “Although that might hit too close to home for someone like you, unpleasant and dull enough that the only way you’ll ever get laid is if you crawl up a chicken’s ass and wait.”

The man’s face goes a bit purple. Shen Yuan slaps a hand over his mouth so he can't be caught grinning. What the fuck, Luo Binghe!!

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan scolds again, after he’s managed to compose himself. The other guy is still gaping like a fish. “What did I tell you about customer service, ah!! I said people would tolerate a lot at a place like this, but not - not *that* much!”

“I didn’t start it,” Luo Binghe protests. “I’m perfectly capable of ignoring this sort of nuisance if they don’t demand anything of me in return.”

“It’s your *job* to have things demanded of you,” Shen Yuan explains, exasperated.

“I want a different job,” Luo Binghe complains. “Can’t I just go back to being your -”

“No!!” Shen Yuan yelps, waving his hands a bit frantically. “And - and don’t mention that sort of thing so casually!”

Luo Binghe’s brow furrows. “I mentioned it casually with no issue before.”

“It’s different,” Shen Yuan hisses.

We’re in public, ah, leave me some face! I don’t need everyone knowing I have such poor taste in the products I sample!!

“I don’t care if you quit right after, but at least just give me my food, ah…” The scorned customer says, with far less heat in his voice than he’d had previously.

Luo Binghe turns back to glare at him. “Ask again and I’ll spit in your food if I *do* make it,” he snaps.

“Don’t spit in other peoples’ food!” Shen Yuan cries.

“Oh,” Luo Binghe says, turning to look at Shen Yuan curiously and suddenly using a *very* different tone of voice. “Do you want me to spit in yours?”

“Absolutely fucking not! What the fuck!! Luo *Binghe!!!”*

“Please…” The other guy says weakly, and honestly, what is he even still *doing* here?! “Please, my food…”

Luo Binghe is fired from the internet cafe.

Shen Yuan manages to just barely hold in the desire to rant at Luo Binghe on the way home, wary of provoking Luo Binghe into doing weird things in public like bite or growl or whatever.

(He *did* hand Luo Binghe a whole pile of Bad Boy stars as they left the internet cafe, but he’s beginning to suspect the bad ones have far less of an effect on Luo Binghe than the good ones do… Maybe Shen Yuan needs to find an evil equivalent of the head pats Luo Binghe enjoys alongside the good stars?)

“I don’t understand why you had to be so resistant to just doing a bit of work, ah!” Shen Yuan complains as soon as they’re home. “You agreed to take the job!!”

“Under duress,” Luo Binghe grumbles, brushing past Shen Yuan to drop himself heavily onto the couch and pull Shen Yuan’s laptop onto his lap from the coffee table. “I never wanted a job to begin with - I *had* a job, for many years, and built up plenty of riches that I *took with me* into this *stupid* world -”

Shen Yuan snorts, watching Luo Binghe type angrily on the laptop as he complains.

“What duress, hm? Hadn’t you agreed to do everything I told you to?” He asks.

Admittedly, Shen Yuan had known exactly what sort of nasty experience someone as unpleasant as Luo Binghe would have in any sort of customer service position, even if Shen Yuan did try to find job types that would mitigate that a small amount. It *was* supposed to be something of a punishment, after all.

“Ask me to do something different,” Luo Binghe sulks, still typing away. “Nothing like that.”

“You’ll have people asking you to do stuff for them in any job, you know.”

“No *cooking,”* Luo Binghe clarifies, glaring down at the laptop screen.

Shen Yuan blinks, surprised. “I thought you liked cooking?”

“I do,” Luo Binghe says through gritted teeth. “Which is why you cannot ever make me do that again. That was -”

Luo Binghe breaks off, slamming his hands down onto the laptop several times in succession. Then he pauses, sighs heavily, and backspaces rapidly to get rid of the resulting keyboard smash.

“Food is *important,”* Luo Binghe stresses. “It should not be - I will not ‘cook’ like *that.”*

“Oh,” Shen Yuan says, a bit taken aback by how distressed Luo Binghe seems.

Well, alright, he mostly seems irritated and like he’d bite any object that Shen Yuan brought halfway near his mouth right now, but - still!

With how easily Luo Binghe makes himself at home in Shen Yuan’s apartment, Shen Yuan forgets sometimes that he’d originally picked Luo Binghe off the streets. If Luo Binghe’s skill and interest in cooking came from a history of food insecurity shaping his values…

Shen Yuan shifts a bit, vaguely uncomfortable. He certainly hasn't ever had to struggle with anything like that in the past, so he doesn’t know how likely or unlikely it is for Luo Binghe’s high standards for food to come from a tragic backstory or whatever. Maybe Luo Binghe is just a dick who doesn’t like to cook for strangers, or a spoiled brat who doesn’t like to use subpar tools when he’s gotten used to Shen Yuan’s kitchen.

It doesn’t seem *unlikely* for a past with food insecurity to make someone become highly invested in cooking, though. Something like, ‘if you’re in a position to provide others with meals, it should be good food,’ or whatever.

Shen Yuan sighs, moving to join Luo Binghe on the couch. He can let this one go for now, he supposes. There’s plenty of punishment worthy service jobs that don’t handle cheap food in questionable settings. House cleaning or working at a call center or something, maybe.

“What are you working on so furiously?” Shen Yuan asks, letting the topic drop and leaning into Luo Binghe’s side to watch him type.

Shen Yuan had half-expected to see Luo Binghe leaving a bad review for the internet cafe they’d come from, but he doesn’t seem to have an internet browser up at all, actually. Instead, he’s in a text editing application, and it almost looks like -

“A resume?” Shen Yuan confirms, curious. “So you know how to do this sort of thing after all, hm?”

“There are templates on the internet,” Luo Binghe says, using that same smug sort of voice he always uses when talking about learning or finding very basic things online. Weirdo.

Shen Yuan hums, watching silently for a moment as Luo Binghe types. He’s working on listing out his experiences now: *‘Married several hundred times. No divorces. Only three runaways and one casualty of the harem.’*

…Shen Yuan spares a very, very judgemental look Luo Binghe’s way.

“What sort of job will this be good for?” He asks dryly. “Something at a local theater? Getting back into acting after all?”

“I’ll do anything Yuan-ge asks of me,” Luo Binghe says, not even flinching when Shen Yuan elbows him for the unauthorized ‘Ge’ usage. “Except for any career even remotely related to what Shen Jiu does.”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to make some sort of snarky response - something like, *'what, after you already made a career of being my fake boyfriend so you could chase after Shen Jiu?'* - but closes it in the next moment. He doesn't want to touch that sore spot with a ten foot pole, actually! Let him have a solid week of peace first, please!!

"Alright, then what?" Shen Yuan asks instead.

"I'm applying to be your *real* boyfriend," Luo Binghe grumbles. "I'll be sure to outline the job position's expectations, too, so there won't be any misunderstandings this time."

Shen Yuan elbows him again.

"I'm not hiring," he says blandly. "Give it up, Binghe."

Luo Binghe does not give up. His expression only grows a bit more mullish as he continues his too-forceful typing.

"I'll take 'husband,' too, if it's the title that is the issue," he says, glaring furiously at the laptop.

Shen Yuan rears back, smacking at Luo Binghe's shoulder. "Don't *joke,"* he hisses, feeling his cheeks heat for no reason.

Luo Binghe spares a moment to move his glare to Shen Yuan himself before looking back at the laptop and continuing typing. *'Expected salary: reasonable combination of compliments and dignified physical-based praise centered around the head.'*

Shen Yuan snickers, leaning back into Luo Binghe's side to get a better look.

"That's a pretty convoluted way of saying 'praise me and pet my head,' don't you think?" He asks, amused. "Are you sure you aren't applying for the position of my dog?"

Luo Binghe doesn't reply, but he types with especially intense focus: *'Expected bonuses: dual cultivation.'*

Shen Yuan coughs, feeling his cheeks heat again, and shifts his head so his chin is digging painfully into Luo Binghe's shoulder as petty revenge.

"You're wasting your time," Shen Yuan grumbles, having significantly less fun when he's the one getting embarrassed. "The whole point of this punishment was for you to have a *real* job. Be forced to listen to someone else's orders besides mine, and be forced to interact semi-politely to a bunch of strangers, and all that."

"Yuan-ge doesn't have a real job," Luo Binghe points out bitterly.

"..."

Shen Yuan graciously allows Luo Binghe to get away with calling him 'Ge' just this once, and *not* because he's mentally flailing around a bit thinking, *ah shit, he caught me!!*

“Ahem,” Shen Yuan says after a beat. “I - well. Ahem. I was having fun putting you to work?” He tries.

Luo Binghe points at the laptop screen. “Yes,” he agrees. “Putting me to work.”

Then he goes back to his resume, revising the *‘Expected Salary’* section to also mention a *‘standard amount of kisses.’* Shen Yuan sighs.

Why does it feel a bit like Luo Binghe is some sort of career wife, ah?! And he’s so bad at it, too!!

Actually… Shen Yuan rereads Luo Binghe’s expected salary and bonuses. For a position very similar to ‘fake’ boyfriend, the transactions there certainly aren’t anything that Luo Binghe had been practicing with Shen Yuan, these past few months.

…Is it possible that Luo Binghe is so awful at this because he’s out of practice?

Once, when Shen Yuan had first taken up reading about puppy training in an attempt to tame this wild dog of his, he’d read that puppies who don’t receive proper socialization and play with others can end up keeping their habits of biting and teething on others as a fully mature dog.

Luo Binghe bites quite a bit.

Shen Yuan has also thought not infrequently that he almost acts a bit touch-starved, the way he calms down so quickly when Shen Yuan gets his hands in his hair.

Is it possible… Luo Binghe was renting himself out to begin with because it was a good way to get both money and physical affection, rather than it just being the only job he could possibly think of?

No no no, that would be stupid, with a face like *that* there wouldn’t be any need to get physical affection from fake boyfriends, ah! And - and if Luo Binghe *had* explicitly been looking for those sorts of sweet touches, it would mean Shen Yuan had practically been denying him those for months now, which would be cruel, and Shen Yuan isn’t *that* mean!!

Shen Yuan hesitates. Luo Binghe… really had been gripping him especially tightly, that afternoon they’d napped on the couch together. Maybe that hadn’t all been Luo Binghe’s red-flag weirdness, and instead a more pitiful sort of weirdness?

No, Shen Yuan refuses to believe it. There’s no way this pretty boy has been that desperate for a kind touch, Shen Yuan won’t be the villain here!!

Beside him, Luo Binghe revises his expected salary once more: *‘kisses are to be delivered primarily to the mouth, but face and hand kisses are acceptable as smaller payments.’*

Shen Yuan stares. Hand kisses?? Those - those were *far* too sweet of a gesture for Luo Binghe’s perverted inclinations! Isn’t that really a sign that Shen Yuan really has been neglecting this dog of his after all?!

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, steeling himself. Alright, alright - Luo Binghe will still receive his punishment, obviously, but clearly he won't be able to focus on a real job until he can rest assured that his basic necessities will be provided for in avenues outside of fake boyfriend salaries.

It isn't even gay, really, or letting Luo Binghe get away with anything! It's just basic caretaking!!

"Binghe, look at me for a moment," Shen Yuan says gravely.

Luo Binghe turns to look at him, still glaring. Shen Yuan reaches up to take his face in both hands, squishing his cheeks together so his lips pucker up foolishly.

"This isn't an acceptance of your application," Shen Yuan warns. "This is just motivation for you to work properly. You won't be able to convince me to do this again even if you beg like this again."

Luo Binghe stares blankly at him. Shen Yuan can read very clearly on his face: *What begging?*

The begging you are clearly doing right now, twisting my arm into doing this against my will, ah! Shen Yuan mentally complains. A bit flustered, he uses his grip on Luo Binghe's face to make him nod as if in agreement. Luo Binghe looks as if he's considering chewing on Shen Yuan's hands to get him to stop.

"Good," Shen Yuan says, satisfied with this sort of 'agreement' from Luo Binghe.

Then, he leans up to press an awkward kiss to Luo Binghe's forehead.

…Shen Yuan is a bit confused. Isn't that whole 'feeling sparks when you kiss someone' reserved for actual, romantic, on-the-mouth kisses? Why do Shen Yuan's lips feel like they've been electrocuted??

Luo Binghe shifts under Shen Yuan's hands, and Shen Yuan quickly pulls back with a scowl, dropping his hands from Luo Binghe's face as he feels his own cheeks heat. His mouth really does feel a bit tingly, like he pressed it up against a live electrical outlet, and Shen Yuan can't help but bring a hand up to hover over his own mouth. How odd…

"Now say thank you," Shen Yuan says sternly, skirting away from meeting Luo Binghe's eyes so he doesn't have to see how wide they are, and -

Shen Yuan pauses. In avoiding meeting Luo Binghe's eyes directly, he'd glanced up a bit to Luo Binghe's forehead, unconsciously looking back to where he'd kissed.

Luo Binghe's tattooed and very fake demonic huadian is glowing.

"What the fuck," Shen Yuan says, suddenly very concerned that the 'sparks' he felt might actually have been literal. "What the fuck is - Binghe, you're, uh, glowing."

Luo Binghe blinks. He absently brings a hand up to brush over his demonic huadian, his face going slack with surprise.

Then his eyes sharpen on Shen Yuan, and Shen Yuan - uh, Shen Yuan had really thought Luo Binghe hadn't been wearing those red colored contacts today!

"You fixed it," Luo Binghe breathes, dropping his hand from his forehead. "With just - just that?"

"...Did you have, like, a broken LED installed under your skin up there? Is that what kids these days do with tattoos?" Shen Yuan asks, a bit wary.

Luo Binghe snorts, and raises a hand up to Shen Yuan, palm up. Shen Yuan must have blinked, though, because he somehow missed Luo Binghe pulling out matches or a lighter or something, and now Luo Binghe's *hand is on fire -!*

"You *fixed it,"* Luo Binghe repeats, and when Shen Yuan manages to wrench his gaze away from the fucked up and very not-real black fire in Luo Binghe's hand, he's a bit taken aback by how positively thrilled Luo Binghe looks.

"No," Shen Yuan says, a bit dazed. "I think something is actually very, very wrong here…"

"Thank you," Luo Binghe says earnestly, and Shen Yuan blinks at him, having totally forgotten he'd requested that Luo Binghe say thanks to begin with.

"No, no," Shen Yuan says again, his voice pitching higher. He is - uh, he's feeling just a *little* hysterical, here! "No, don't thank me, I think you need to go to the hospital? Maybe we both do?? Is there a gas leak in the apartment?!"

Luo Binghe doesn't seem to pay attention to Shen Yuan's words, though, somehow extinguishing the fire in his hand before quickly pushing the laptop away and setting it on the coffee table in front of the couch.

"Wait here," he says, getting up and taking off in the direction of Shen Yuan's bedroom. His feet skid a bit on the floor with how eagerly he's bolting through the apartment.

That's kind of cute, Shen Yuan thinks, and then follows that up with, *oh fuck we* definitely *have gas poisoning if I'm having those sorts of thoughts about Luo Binghe, ah!*

Luo Binghe comes back quickly with his cosplay robes in his arms, practically jumping back onto the couch with Shen Yuan. There's some shifting around as he turns the robes so he can reach into one of the sleeves, and then -

And then Shen Yuan has a pile of gold and gemstones on his lap. What the fuck. There's a crown poking into his leg and a string of diamonds glowing faintly in Luo Binghe's hands in a way that rocks are definitely not supposed to be glowing. *What the fuck.*

"No need for a job after all," Luo Binghe says gleefully, still pulling out treasures from the sleeves of his robes. "You really - you really fixed it!"

Shen Yuan watches in stunned silence. Luo Binghe's demonic huadian is still glowing and his eyes are still red and - were his ears always that pointed? And - and when did he have time to paint his nails and file them down into sharp little points and -

"What the fuck," Shen Yuan breathes.

"I can buy myself whatever Yuan-ge wants me to have, with this," Luo Binghe explains. "And now you can't pretend you don't know I've *had* a job, and we can put that filthy experience behind us both. Here -"

Luo Binghe lifts a simple silver bracelet from the pile and takes one of Shen Yuan's hands, carefully slipping the jewelry onto him. Once on Shen Yuan's wrist, it seems to shrink just slightly - not so tight that it presses into Shen Yuan's skin, but not so loose that it could slip off his hand again, either - and a small thread of blood red shimmers into existence around the center of it.

"Now I've hired you to be *my* boyfriend," Luo Binghe says, sounding especially pleased with himself.

Shen Yuan stares down at the bracelet. It is a very good replica of the Lover's Blood Circlet from PIDW, which the character Luo Binghe had made in order to distinguish one consort to be higher than all others. Of course, before Luo Binghe could *do* anything with it, the commenters had gotten into a violent war about which wife was worthy of such a position, and Airplane had resolved the situation by never having Luo Binghe give the damn thing away to begin with.

Yes, it's a very good replica…

Shen Yuan looks back up at Luo Binghe in horror.

"You *lied* to me about your *tragic backstory?!"* He cries, voice shrill.

Luo Binghe - the real, actual, demonic Luo Binghe - blinks at him.

"If there are any discrepancies in the biography of my life, how could they be my fault?" He asks, perfectly calm. Then he turns his nose up and adds: "Blame that seer who wrote it - the one from the airplane in the sky."

"I thought you *came from the streets!!"* Shen Yuan shrieks, deciding to ignore any implication that such a hack author could be anything cool like a *seer,* if only for his own sanity. "I thought you were some sort of sad wet dog who didn't know real affection!!"

Luo Binghe stares at him. Shen Yuan stares back, every muscle tense, frozen in a panicked fight-or-flight impulse where Shen Yuan is torn between whacking at Luo Binghe for deceiving him or running for his life after making *the* Luo Binghe work a shitty customer service job.

…Slowly, several neurons finally make a connection in Shen Yuan's mind.

“Wait,” he says, thinking over what he’d just said about ‘time on the streets’ and ‘no real love’ and *everything about Luo Binghe.* “Wait, wait - your tragic backstory is *worse* than I thought?! What!! What the fuck!! How *dare* you -!”

“...What exactly did I do this time?” Luo Binghe asks, sounding a bit exasperated. “If Yuan-ge doesn’t like this bracelet, I can give him a different one -”

“You’re *Luo Binghe!!”* Shen Yuan cries. His voice cracks embarrassingly on Luo Binghe’s name.

Luo Binghe stares at him some more. “...Yes,” he agrees. “I told you that.”

“I - how was I supposed to know you were the real one!! What the fuck!!!”

“I *told you,”* Luo Binghe says again, scowling a bit.

“You saw my bedroom!! I ate your food!!” Shen Yuan brings his hands up to clutch his face, more and more horrified with every passing moment. “I - I *pat your head!!”*

Luo Binghe’s expression turns wary. “Don’t think foolish things. I deserve those.”

Shen Yuan pauses in his panicking to think, *what the fuck, Luo Binghe just got defensive about me possibly taking away headpats from him, what the fuck.*

...Should Shen Yuan take away headpats from him?? That’s *Luo Binghe!!*

Shen Yuan thinks about the Luo Binghe from the webnovel he’d read, the one with an even more devastatingly tragic backstory than the one that *this* Luo Binghe had tricked Shen Yuan into thinking he had. That Luo Binghe…

“Of course you deserve them,” Shen Yuan snaps, suddenly a bit irritated with himself.

That’s *Luo Binghe,* he thinks again, but this time he remembers how terribly Airplane had treated this genuinely interesting character. Of everything Shen Yuan has done to this rabid dog, headpats were the most reasonable, actually!!

“Good,” Luo Binghe says, and then: “Did you… not think I was Luo Binghe? This whole time?”

“Of course not!!” Shen Yuan cries, back to panicking. “Luo Binghe is from a *webnovel!!”*

“I *told* you,” Luo Binghe says again, sounding a bit miffed.

“I thought you were just pretending!!”

“You would have let an *imposter* date you?” Luo Binghe asks, offended.

“No! Well, I -” Shen Yuan flounders for words. “It wasn’t *real* dating!!”

Luo Binghe bares his teeth at him. *Oh,* Shen Yuan thinks, a bit dazed, *he does that because of actual demonic instinct. That's actually kind of -*

Shen Yuan slaps his own cheeks harshly. He will absolutely fucking *not* be tricked into thinking Luo Binghe's weird mean habits are anything remotely close to 'cute,' thank you very much!!

Even if this is the *real* Luo Binghe, it's also still the asshole who's been living with Shen Yuan this whole time!!

"...Oh," Shen Yuan says, processing that thought. Suddenly he feels far less panicked.

This *is* still the Luo Binghe that Shen Yuan has been living with for months now. He's still baring his teeth at Shen Yuan and asking for headpats and being rude whenever possible. This Luo Binghe isn't anything to panic about after all - even if Shen Yuan had forced Luo Binghe into a shitty costumer service job, even if he'd made Luo Binghe cook for him and repair anime figures for him - he'd done all those things to Luo Binghe because Luo Binghe had let him.

After all, even if Luo Binghe is more dangerous with full access to all his demonic and cultivation abilities, he still could've done as he pleased to Shen Yuan with kitchen knives or whatever.

If Luo Binghe let Shen Yuan boss him around before, he'll let Shen Yuan boss him around now, too!

Who cares if this is the real Luo Binghe! Who cares if he's actually demonic and has magic cultivation powers and tools! He's still Shen Yuan's Luo Binghe, too - the Luo Binghe that Shen Yuan has been carefully training to be a good boy!!

"Okay, I'm over it now," Shen Yuan says, nodding to himself.

He is not, in fact, over it, but he's reached a state of acceptance knowing that he can have the rest of this breakdown in the bath later. Now that he's no longer worried about the fact that his Luo Binghe is actually a demonic emperor with a lifetime of murder on his hands - after all, he doesn't seem likely to murder *now* if Shen Yuan scolds him for it - he's mostly left with just the panic about his fundamental understanding of the universe and multidimensionality being broken. Existential panic is normal anyway, and can safely be repressed until bathtime.

"I'm not over it," Luo Binghe protests. "You - you fixed it with just that, but you - you really didn't even know?"

"I didn't," Shen Yuan says. "I mean, who would? You couldn't prove it, and cosplay is like, a *thing."*

Luo Binghe searches his face, his expression turning almost helpless.

“You really didn’t know,” Luo Binghe repeats, voice quiet. “None of it - you really didn’t know about any of it, you really -”

Shen Yuan watches him, as emotionally helpless as he’d been when he’d been crying in Shen Yuan’s lap about Shen Jiu being Shen Yuan’s brother, and comes to an unfortunate understanding.

“You thought my brother was *Shen Qingqiu?!”* He asks, baffled more than he is alarmed. “I mean - sure, he’s kind of an ass, but he isn’t - he doesn’t *abuse kids!”*

Luo Binghe swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing, his mouth thinning. Shen Yuan stares back at him, mouth agape.

Shen Yuan has a lot of things that he has to say about this, he thinks. He has to make sure that Luo Binghe absolutely does *not* associate Shen Jiu with the man he human-sticked in his home world, no matter what sort of inter-dimensional similarities Luo Binghe may have recognized in Shen Jiu. He has to figure out what those inter-dimensional similarities might be, too, and decide if there’s anything Shen Yuan should do to disprove them, or whatever.

He should probably also make it clear to Luo Binghe that he wouldn’t have tried even a *little* bit to help hook Luo Binghe up with his old Shizun if he knew his old Shizun was *actually* a villain and not just an actor. Actually, he should probably figure out why the hell Luo Binghe had been looking to romance that villain to begin with, and - and fuck, is that the sort of thing you send someone to therapy for?? Does *Luo Binghe* need therapy???

First, though, Shen Yuan really, really needs to say this:

“Binghe, you know I wouldn’t have said you have to get along with my brother if I knew you thought he was someone who *abused* you, right? And - I mean Shen Qingqiu tried to kill you outright, actually, and -”

Shen Yuan pauses, licking his lips. He doesn’t really have a good way of saying this, honestly, but if he doesn’t say something now he’ll be awake all night worrying about it.

“Are you… alright living with me, actually? I mean - I can make sure that Er-ge never comes by unannounced, and -”

Luo Binghe shudders, a full body, shaky movement, and then all at once lunges forward to wrap himself around Shen Yuan. It’s an incredibly awkward position, Shen Yuan’s lap occupied with gold and jewelry and magical artifacts and not really having room for a large demonic lapdog. Still, Shen Yuan does his best to gather Luo Binghe up in his arms.

“It’s fine,” Luo Binghe says, his words muffled into Shen Yuan’s shoulder. “It’s - you really, really didn’t know, about any of it, and you still -”

Luo Binghe falls silent, shuddering again.

“...Is it something bad?” Shen Yuan asks.

"No," Luo Binghe says, turning his head so Shen Yuan can feel his breath on his skin. "No, you're so - Yuan-ge is really, really good. You didn't know anything, and you still just let me come back home."

"Oh, well - well it's not like I let you get away with *everything,* you still can't call me 'Ge' right now…"

"Mm," Luo Binghe agrees. "I know. I have to get along with your brother."

"Well - that is, surely given the new information, I can come up with some other sort of punishment," Shen Yuan sputters. "I'll find a way to convince you that Shen Jiu *isn't* some version of Shen Qingqiu, but until then, I'm not - I won't make you sit in a room with him…"

"It's fine," Luo Binghe repeats.

He pulls back slightly, just enough that he can meet Shen Yuan's eyes.

"I want you to be my Yuan-ge," he says. "I've been through far worse for less."

Shen Yuan feels his expression crumple.

"I know," he says, because he really, really does. He read all about it. He complained all about it! "You really didn't deserve any of that, Binghe…"

Luo Binghe's grip on Shen Yuan tightens. He's still hunched over and stretched all weird, trying to shove himself in Shen Yuan's lap despite all the riches in the way.

"Like what?" Luo Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan finds it suddenly impossible to look away from the pretty red of his eyes. "What, specifically, didn't I deserve?"

Shen Yuan swallows. Luo Binghe looks almost hungry, and Shen Yuan can feel his nails - his claws, those are demon claws, now! - digging into his skin through his clothes.

"Like - I mean, the obvious stuff, from when you were a kid, but -" Shen Yuan breaks off, licking his lips nervously. "But even after, even - even when you were emperor -"

"Like what?" Luo Binghe breathes.

"Everyone always told you that your cooking was incredible, but no one ever asked if they could help with the dishes, and you never got time to just *rest,* there was always some fight you had to win or woman you had to - um, you know - like did you even get to have *hobbies?* And -"

Luo Binghe's grip tightens, his face pressing closer to Shen Yuan's, so near to him that Shen Yuan can feel Luo Binghe's breath on his cheek. Shen Yuan can't help but tighten his own grip on Luo Binghe, too.

"And after you merged the realms - which, Binghe, you *know* that was awful, right? Don't *do* stuff like that! - but after, you had to recover so much of your energy and feed Xin Mo, and Ma Yujie -"

“Who?” Luo Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan flusters.

“Your 217th wife! Binghe, you - pay attention! Ma Yujie sat in your room all night playing the qin to soothe you, but she kept playing that same song over and over - the one you’d heard at dinner once and glanced over at the musicians, but you’d only looked because the song was one you’d been beaten for not learning well enough on Qing Jing, and Ma Yujie never *asked* she just *assumed* it was because you liked it so she played it all night long when you needed *rest* -”

“I remember that,” Luo Binghe says, smiling wryly. “I used qi to plug my ears so I didn’t have to hear it.”

“I know!” Shen Yuan cries. “Isn’t that awful? Isn’t that - isn’t it just one of so many things you’ve had to put up with?”

Luo Binghe leans in even closer, nosing into Shen Yuan’s cheek. Shen Yuan shuts up, listening to Luo Binghe breathe in deep, smelling him. Shen Yuan hopes he doesn’t smell too - too - he doesn’t even know, fuck -!

“Yuan-ge has always thought so much about me,” Luo Binghe sighs, clearly pleased. “I want to hear about everything you’ve ever thought about me - every single time you’ve thought I deserved better. I want to bite off pieces of you until you live inside me, and that still might not be enough.”

Shen Yuan feels himself flush, his eyes straining to keep looking at Luo Binghe even with their faces pressed against each other.

“That -” Shen Yuan’s voice cracks, and he swallows, starting again. “That’s weird. Don’t do that.”

Luo Binghe grins, and Shen Yuan can feel his teeth against his cheek.

“Hadn’t you just been saying I deserved better?” He asks, still hungry and pleased and pressing his toothy grin into Shen Yuan. “You’d still order me around and scold me, even after everything you just said?”

“Of course,” Shen Yuan says, a bit affronted at the mere idea of *not* bullying Luo Binghe into obedience. “That’s - it’s different.”

“It is,” Luo Binghe agrees. “That’s why it’s fine - why I’ll get along with Shen Jiu for two hours so I can call you Yuan-ge again.”

Shen Yuan sighs, his breath coming out a bit unevenly. “Binghe…”

“It’s fine,” Luo Binghe reassures once more. “You didn’t know. You’re *good.”*

Shen Yuan sighs again, but he feels more settled, this time. So long as Luo Binghe agrees…

Well, fine! Fine, fine! Everything is fine, and there’s no need for this serious sort of mood anymore! Luo Binghe isn’t even crying, so there’s *really* no need for it!!

“If I had known you were the real Luo Binghe,” Shen Yuan says seriously, “I would definitely never, *ever* have encouraged you to learn about guns with paintball.”

Luo Binghe snorts, finally pulling back away from Shen Yuan, and Shen Yuan finds himself grinning nervously. Good, good - this mood is better for sure.

“Your world’s weapons are fascinating,” Luo Binghe says. “I would have found ways to learn about them regardless.”

“What, like you aren’t already deadly enough on your own?” Shen Yuan asks, unwrapping his arms from Luo Binghe just to knock him gently over the head. “You have Xin Mo! Which, speaking of, is even *more* OP than I thought, since I’m assuming you being here is proof that it can cross entire worlds rather than just realms with it.”

Luo Binghe sighs. “You *would* like that damned sword.”

Shen Yuan sputters. What kind of assumption is that, that he’d be fond of some deadly and evil thing!!

“Do you not want to see it?” Luo Binghe asks.

“Shut up, of course I want to see it!!” Shen Yuan scolds. *“...Can* I see it?”

Luo Binghe scoots back a bit so there’s more distance between the two of them, leaving the air between them feeling cold and weird. Then he reaches up and gestures with one hand, going from empty handed in one moment to having pulled a sword hilt from nothingness.

It would be objectively so fucking cool, if only the rest of the sword hadn’t fallen in several large shards to land on the pile of gems in Luo Binghe’s lap.

“Xin Mo is *shattered?!”* Shen Yuan cries, perhaps unduly distressed to see a sword he didn’t even think existed in real life several minutes ago be broken now.

“The trip to this world must have been too much for it to bear after all,” Luo Binghe says, looking down at the sword shards curiously. “Well, that’s probably for the best.”

“How could that possibly be for the best?! That was Xin Mo!!”

Luo Binghe levels him with an infuriatingly smug look.

“Can’t send me back if there isn’t a way back to begin with,” he says.

“...You’re really beyond any sort of normal,” Shen Yuan sighs. “Don’t throw the shards out, at least - give them to me if they’re useless now.”

“For what?” Luo Binghe asks, curious.

Shen Yuan sniffs, looking away. “I can display it next to my replica - no one *else* has actual Xin Mo pieces in their merch collections.”

“You’re really beyond any sort of normal,” Luo Binghe parrots, but he’s got his too-sharp teeth displayed in a toothy grin, so, ehh -

It’s probably fine.

Later, after Shen Yuan has had his spiraling breakdown in the bath, and after he’s helped Luo Binghe carefully store away all his precious gems and artifacts and everything else that had been stored in his sleeves, Shen Yuan crawls into bed with the full intention of spending several quiet hours reading before going to sleep. Escapism really is the best method of not-processing any day’s events, you know!!

Unfortunately, laying in bed on his phone is also an excellent way to ensure he’s awake when Luo Binghe sneaks into his room later.

Luo Binghe freezes when he sees Shen Yuan awake on his phone, staring at him like a deer in the headlights. Er, sort of like that, except his eyes are glinting in the dark like a cat’s, which looks far more predatory than a deer.

“...Yes?” Shen Yuan asks after a moment of staring in silence.

Luo Binghe stares for another moment, then clears his throat. “I’ve had a very long day,” he says.

“Tell me about it,” Shen Yuan sighs, eyeing Luo Binghe’s demonic huadian.

It’s glowing ever so slightly in the dark of Shen Yuan’s room. *A cute little nightlight,* Shen Yuan thinks absently, quickly followed up by, *fuck, I really* am *tired.*

“I got both of my cultivations back, and my body had several physical changes,” Luo Binghe continues very matter-of-factly.

“Congrats on leaving this mortal coil behind,” Shen Yuan deadpans.

Luo Binghe narrows his eyes at him.

“I - I learned that I couldn’t ever go back to my own world?” He tries, despite having told Shen Yuan quite bluntly earlier that he had no desire to make such a return in the first place.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “Haven’t you learned to beg nicely by now?”

Luo Binghe glares at him, but he *does* purse his lips into an approximation of a pout, so that’s sort of cute, at least.

“Alright, then,” Shen Yuan sighs. “Come on.”

Saying so, he scoots over to one side of his bed, and Luo Binghe scampers over to take the other side. Shen Yuan goes back to reading on his phone as Luo Binghe gets comfortable,

worming his way under the blankets and scooting in close until he can wrap himself around Shen Yuan's back.

It isn't a bed made for two people, and by the time Luo Binghe has stopped shuffling around, their legs have ended up tangled together. Luo Binghe's grip on Shen Yuan is too-tight as always, but it's also a bit like being hugged by a space heater, so Shen Yuan just hums and relaxes into it.

"Are you reading about me?" Luo Binghe asks after getting comfortable, his nose pressed firmly into the back of Shen Yuan's neck.

"No fucking way," Shen Yuan snorts. "I have enough of you as it is, thank you."

Luo Binghe makes an offended noise in the back of his throat, and Shen Yuan uses the hand not holding his phone to pat at the arm draped over his waist.

"The main character in this one isn't any good, though," he says, half in reassurance and half in genuine complaint. "There's such a thing as *too* genre savvy - this guy's just as bland as can be, nothing ever gets to him."

"Mm," Luo Binghe says, pressing himself ever closer to Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan, especially eager to complain after the day he's had, takes that as an invitation.

"The supporting cast isn't bad as a whole," he continues. "But this two-faced bitch that's getting setup to be the love interest is *miserable.* Last chapter, she poisoned the well of the entire estate just to get back at a single servant - how dumb can you be? Now she's rolling around in bed with all the symptoms of her own poisoning, and -"

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe cuts in, "if we were a story, what kind would we be?"

Shen Yuan scowls, both at being called 'Yuan-ge' and having his complaints cut off.

"A comedy of errors," he grumbles. "A tragedy. My own personal obituary, maybe."

Luo Binghe bites the nape of Shen Yuan's neck, hard enough Shen Yuan yelps at the feeling of his fangs digging into his skin.

"No need for that!" He cries, squirming in Luo Binghe's hold as he tries to get some leverage to elbow or kick him or something.

"Answer seriously," Luo Binghe says, releasing his bite.

"Fine, fine, ah!" Shen Yuan scowls, squirming a bit some more before settling back down. "I guess - I mean, it would have to be transmigration, right?"

"Transmigration?" Luo Binghe asks, clearly not having expected that particular response.

"Since you came from a different world -"

Luo Binghe shifts suddenly, rolling them both over so that Shen Yuan is on his back and Luo Binghe is hovering over him, his face inches from Shen Yuan's own.

Shen Yuan falls silent, staring up at him. Luo Binghe searches Shen Yuan's face, expression especially intense, but eventually he just shakes his head.

"No," he says. "Even if that's right, don't talk about it. I don't care about that anymore."

Shen Yuan blinks up at Luo Binghe, only growing more confused. Did he want a serious answer or not, ah?!

"I'm asking about *our* story," Luo Binghe clarifies.

"Oh, you mean -" Shen Yuan's voice dies in his throat. Doesn't that sound like Luo Binghe is looking for some sort of sappy, overly-tropey answer?

"Earlier, you really did fix everything. Neither of my cultivations are as strong as they were before, and my demonic features aren't as pronounced - I think they still don't quite fit in this world," Luo Binghe continues. "Even so, it's all there. Every technique, every treasure I had brought with me, every part of me that was lost when I first came to this world - you fixed it."

"Um. I'm glad?"

Luo Binghe shakes his head again.

"You *fixed* it," he stresses, "but you didn't dual cultivate with me. You didn't even kiss me properly."

"Wha - hey!" Shen Yuan protests weakly, his face growing very warm very quickly. "What makes a kiss proper or not, huh?"

"You just gave me such a simple thing, and that was all it took." Luo Binghe says, voice quiet even as his expression remains intense. "We're a love story."

"O-oh," Shen Yuan squeaks. "That's, um. That's really cheesy…"

"Mm," Luo Binghe agrees, and then rolls back over and gathers Shen Yuan up in his arms again.

Shen Yuan is left feeling bereft - that sort of moment, and Luo Binghe - he just rolled over and was done with it just like that? What kind of cheap, no-good -

We're a love story, Shen Yuan hears echo in his own mind, and he quickly turns over again, too, so his back is once more to Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe loosens his grip on him just enough to let him turn over, then clings on tightly once more as soon as Shen Yuan is settled. *A love story…*

Shen Yuan hopes the tips of his ears are covered by his hair properly. How embarrassing, if Luo Binghe could see…

“I -” Shen Yuan’s voice cracks, and he swallows, then starts again. “I had another idea for a job you could do,” he says.

Luo Binghe sighs heavily, his breath making Shen Yuan’s hair flip up oddly at the base of his neck.

“Didn’t I give you all those precious things from my qiankun sleeves earlier?” He asks. “Aren’t I the same as you now?”

Shen Yuan clears his throat awkwardly, trying to quickly brush past the accusation of being a kid with no job sitting on a bunch of money.

“You’re an undocumented citizen of a different realm,” he protests weakly. “If you tried to sell a pile of precious gems with no records or known history, you’d end up behind bars faster than I could bail you out.”

Luo Binghe makes a face - Shen Yuan can feel the way his nose scrunches up against his neck.

“Your world has too many rules,” he grumbles.

“Also,” Shen Yuan adds a bit quieter, “I’d help you, this time - it’s an idea for both of us.”

Luo Binghe sighs, his fingers flexing around Shen Yuan’s waist. Shen Yuan kind of wants to pluck his hand off of him to play with it, to inspect Luo Binghe’s claws up close, but he keeps hearing *we’re a love story* over and over and -

Shen Yuan squirms, tucking himself a bit closer into Luo Binghe’s embrace, just to hide a bit better.

“Alright,” Luo Binghe finally says. “I’ll try it, whatever it is.”

“The love story?!” Shen Yuan wheezes, taken off guard.

Luo Binghe snickers. “The job, Yuan-ge.”

“Oh, right, of course, right, that’s -”

“We already have the other one.”

“You -!!” Shen Yuan cries, beating uselessly at the mattress beneath him. He can’t even shove his head under the pillow, because Luo Binghe’s wormed his way into sharing that, too!!

“Mm.”

“...Whatever, whatever!” Shen Yuan cries. “Go to sleep!!”

“Mm.”

“I really mean it!!”

Luo Binghe pulls him in closer. “I know.”

“...Okay,” Shen Yuan mutters.

We’re a love story, he hears again in his own head, and then he goes to sleep as fast as he possibly can so he can’t think about it anymore.

It takes more effort than Shen Yuan had expected - there’s papers to sign and setups to purchase and menus to arrange - but a couple weeks later, he’s helping Luo Binghe sell his baked goods at a farmer’s market.

“I’d do the customer service,” Shen Yuan had explained, “and you’d make the stuff. You’d be making it ahead of time, so you can use my kitchen, and take as much time as you want, and make food that you’re happy to give to people.”

Of course, Luo Binghe still has to be *present* at the market when everything is getting sold - like hell he could convince Shen Yuan to lug all his goods off and sell them on his own! - but Shen Yuan is content to let Luo Binghe hover ominously at the back of their little stall managing the stock while Shen Yuan does the people-work.

This does potentially lead to somewhat of a clientele issue - Shen Yuan catches several people begin to approach their stall and then back off after catching sight of Luo Binghe glaring out at the crowd, but…

Shen Yuan has also caught sight of the expression on Luo Binghe’s face when someone unwraps their purchase to eat right there in the market, the way his expression grows somewhat conflicted and his hands clench and unclench by his sides.

“In the past, I only cooked for my wives and my mother,” Luo Binghe had said yesterday, busy baking as Shen Yuan watched. “Recently, I’ve only cooked for you. Now, with this…”

Shen Yuan hadn’t pressed the issue then, and he won’t now, either. If Luo Binghe comes to him after this is over and says he won’t do it again, then that’s fine. But, ah…

This is the real Luo Binghe, after all. The one that had been forced to learn that people were either out to get him or get in bed with him, the one that Shen Yuan has witnessed first hand grow aggressive when people on the street just happen to look at him for a moment too long.

Something like this, putting effort into making good food and watching complete strangers enjoy it and then go one with their lives - it’s probably good for Luo Binghe.

So Shen Yuan sells the baked goods that Luo Binghe has made while Luo Binghe himself glares out from the back of the stall, and things go mostly like that for the rest of the morning.

Only mostly, though, because there’s one guest that Luo Binghe handles himself.

“Ah, Binghe,” Shen Yuan calls. “You might want to hide…”

Luo Binghe comes up behind him, resting his chin on Shen Yuan's shoulder as if that's actually necessary to see who Shen Yuan is looking at.

"Yuan-ge…" Luo Binghe whines when he sees him, "I thought you weren't inviting him."

"I didn't!" Shen Yuan protests, shoving Luo Binghe's face away and off his shoulder. "But, well, it's *Er-ge.* Of course he found out I was doing something like this…"

Shen Yuan pauses, then remembers to say:

"And no 'Yuan-ge,' even when you're whining!"

Luo Binghe sighs, looking very put out. "Alright," he says. "Give me your phone."

Shen Yuan reaches up to flick at his nose, watching Luo Binghe rear back and scrunch up his nose in distaste.

"Please give me your phone," Luo Binghe revises, and Shen Yuan obliges.

Luo Binghe takes it, navigates to the clock app to set a timer for two hours, and hands it back to Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan glances down at the timer and then back up at Luo Binghe, skeptical.

"...You know it takes like five minutes tops for someone to buy something, right?"

"I'll keep him busy," Luo Binghe promises, expression serious.

"What is this, a boss fight? Why are you saying it like that?" Shen Yuan grumbles.

"A very important boss fight," Luo Binghe agrees. "I should get a kiss for good luck."

"Fuck off," Shen Yuan says, pushing Luo Binghe's face away again when he leans in close. "You aren't getting anything in public."

"But when we're not in public…" Luo Binghe trails off, grinning smugly.

Shen Yuan scowls, turning away. "Whatever, whatever - who can tolerate you, the way you twist everything I say, ah! Get out of here, your timer is ticking! Er-ge hasn't even reached our stall, and your timer is ticking!!"

Luo Binghe laughs. It's a joyous sort of sound; Shen Yuan peeks back over his shoulder so he can catch sight of the toothy grin he knows comes with Luo Binghe's laughter.

"Okay," he says. "I'll be back, then."

And then Luo Binghe slides past him to take his spot at the front of the stall, just in time for Shen Jiu to arrive as well.

Shen Yuan, for his part, steps back and watches. He'll cut in if things start to get too nasty, of course - he doesn't want Luo Binghe to bite Shen Jiu's hand off or for Shen Jiu to send Luo

Binghe into any sort of awful mental spiral. Until it reaches that dangerous sort of point, though…

Well, it's alright to want to watch Luo Binghe get bullied a bit, right?

Fight hard, Er-ge!! Shen Yuan mentally cheers. Then, a bit guiltily, he adds: *And if Binghe ends up eating shit in this battle…*

Mm. He can have a kiss later, if he cries cutely for it.

Chapter End Notes

yes, sj spends an insufferably long time at their stall, judging all the baked goods and making snide comments about lbh and subtley making sure sy is alright. yes, he has his own timer that goes off at an 1hr 50 min, which is his sign to leave. bingge chews on sy as stress relief about it all.

ANYWAY we made it to the end!! i've tricked you all into reading a true love's kiss fic!!! mwahaha!!!!

honestly jokes aside i've been really glad that so many people have been enjoying this. it makes me feel really happy when ppl say that this fic made them smile or laugh, i'm always glad when i can make some of y'all happy with these silly binggeyuan meals :")

also, **FANART ROUND UP** !! if you missed any of these from previous chapters, please go back and look - they're all incredible!!

- ch1 fanart by quirefeast of binggeyuan's first meeting!
- ch2 + ch4 fanart by dubbedcorn of various meme-y moments!
- ch4 fanart by xn3city of sy teasing bingge with his fanny packs!
- ch5 fanart by NoodledYJ of bingge trying to glue miku together!
- ch5 fanart by shitpostlemon of bingge rocking his dual fanny packs at the store!
- ch10 fanart by yohannnb of angry, pouty bingge getting his cheeks squished by sy!
- NEW: ch11 fanart by ixe of bingge regaining his powers!
- NEW: non-chapter-specific fanart by softandworm of sy and his weird guard dog!

if you made art and it's not listed here, please send it to me!! even if you'd rather it not get listed in the notes, i'd still love to stare at it and cry as y'all's incredible art causes me to ascend into binggeyuan heaven :'D

OKIE that was a long note but i think that's everything!! thank you all again for joining me on this rent-a-bingge journey ehehe, and i promise to catch up on comments again soon, or at least before i post whatever my next thing is gjfkh byeeeee 💕💕

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!